The Need For Pre-Evangelism In The New Millennium

Evangelism methods and approaches that were highly successful twenty to thirty years ago are not as successful today. How do we increase our effectiveness in witnessing to others?

BY REV DR DAVE GEISLER
...if one looks at the New Testament, it is clear that Jesus and his disciples used different kinds of questions and approaches depending on the perspective of the audience they were addressing.

The world we live in today is rapidly changing and unfortunately, for the most part, not always for the better. It is different from the one our parents lived in and may be different from our children’s. As a result, many are sounding the alarm.

Christian apologist, J.P. Moreland says, “As we approach the twenty-first century, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to recognize that our entire culture is in trouble. We are staring down the barrel of a loaded gun and we can no longer afford to act like it is loaded with blanks.”

The world we live in today can be characterized by a rejection of moral absolutes, a deep religious skepticism, and an indifference or outright rejection of objective truth, hence creating problems for us in the area of evangelism. Evangelism methods and approaches that were highly successful twenty to thirty years ago are not as successful today. Today, people seem less interested in a simple presentation of the facts of the gospel. Consequently, Christians today find their approaches in evangelism somewhat limiting to some degree. One of my former seminary students, who witnesses to students on college campuses here in Singapore says, “As a Campus Crusade staff, I am trained in using the four spiritual laws and some apologetic skills, but I have problems trying to integrate them during evangelism. When people indicate that they were not interested, I could only ask them for the reason and then invite them for an evangelistic bible study or share my personal testimony.”

Consequently, I believe there is a greater need today for increasing our effectiveness in witnessing to others by giving attention to pre-evangelism or training in Conversational Evangelism (Apologetics). Now, if evangelism is planting seeds of the gospel, pre-evangelism is tilling the soil that the seeds will be planted in (1 Cor. 3:6). Conversational Evangelism explores effective ways of integrating compelling Christian evidences into our daily conversations with pre-believers through interactive dialogue.

In the world we live in today, this is an important pre-evangelistic step for Christians to learn because the ground of people’s hearts and minds may not be fertile enough for the seeds of the gospel. Think for a moment as to how people of other faiths perceive our view of absolute truth. Those both in the East or West may consider it either somewhat arrogant, close-minded, or even intolerant for us as Christians to claim to “know the Truth.” Some may even consider our Christian beliefs as implausible.

The Bible warns us that this time would come. The apostle Paul says in 2 Tim. 4:3-4, that “. . . the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths.”

Consequently, in the new millennium we need to develop pre-evangelistic bridges in our efforts to reach people, especially with those from different worldviews. This is especially important because in today’s world the gospel message may be relatively easy to proclaim but creating an interest in it may not always be so easy. Certainly, we can understand why some may be indifferent to the “Good News” of Christianity if they do not realize there is such a thing as “bad news.” Cultural anthropologist Gene Veith points out that “It is hard to proclaim the forgiveness of sins to people who believe that, since morality is relative, they have no sins to forgive.” An increasing number of non-Christians may even perceive our message as irrelevant or at the very least no better than any other perspective. As a result, this makes our task in doing evangelism more difficult than ever before.

Now, some may consider these as “Western” problems but certainly not a problem for Christians here in the East! Unfortunately, the Tsunami of Postmodernism is blowing from the West to the East and will soon hit our Eastern shores with devastating impact. Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias says, “You are living in a time when the West is looking more like the East, and the East is quietly imitating the West.” As an illustration, one of my former students at East Asia School of Theology, who is a college worker at a church here in Singapore, sent me an urgent e-mail one day about her difficulties in witnessing to college students:

“Many students don’t think that there is a standard of right and wrong. Rather, they believe that this is up to the individual. This means they do hold a standard of right and wrong themselves, but they feel that each person’s standard of right and wrong differs from the other. Personally, I feel stuck as to how to proceed on with the conversation. It’s like saying that this food is nice for me but may not be nice for you. They relegate the standard of right and wrong to personal preference.”

Then she said something that was somewhat unexpected: “I find that I’m shaken. Not in terms of my faith but in terms of how to answer such questions.” Now, if skepticism, pluralism, and postmodern thinking are being felt on university campuses here in the East today,
...there is a greater need today for increasing our effectiveness in witnessing to others by giving attention to pre-evangelism or training in Conversational Evangelism (Apologetics).

The Need for Pre-Evangelism in the New Millennium

Therefore, in order to reach those affected by pluralistic and postmodern thinking, especially those who aren’t very open to “hearing” the truth about Jesus, we need another approach. We need to be like the men of Issachar in the Old Testament, who understood the times in which they lived in and knew what they should do (1 Chron. 12:32). Practically, I believe this means that in certain situations, we need to ask our pre-believing friends questions in such a way to allow them to “surface the truth for themselves” and thereby help them evaluate the strength of their beliefs. Then, we need to help them to build bridges to the gospel, based in part on our mutually shared beliefs (1 Cor. 9:22).

This is not a unique approach, if one looks at the New Testament, it is clear that Jesus and his disciples used different kinds of questions and approaches depending on the perspective of the audience they were addressing. Jesus in fact was a master at asking questions. For example, when a certain ruler asked Jesus, “Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life” Jesus replied, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.” (Lk 18:18-19). When the chief priest and scribes asked Jesus by what authority He was doing these things, Jesus asked them, “Was the Baptism of John from heaven or men?” (verses 10-11).

Jesus also knew the value of allowing others to surface the truth for themselves. For example, when Jesus spoke to the women at the well in Jn. 4, he did not tell her something to the effect of “turn or you will burn.” Instead, he asked her thought-provoking questions and piqued her curiosity. He told her that if you drink of the water that I give you, you will never be thirsty again! (Jn. 4:14). Jesus also knew that sometimes it was best not to tell people things so directly. Many times in Jesus’ ministry he communicated His point by telling parables that not all were able to understand clearly (Matt. 13:11). Jesus also knew that sometimes it was not always best to share all that we know. Towards the end of Jesus’ ministry in Jn. 16:12 Jesus pointed out to His disciples that “I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.”

Jesus and his disciples also understood the value of knowing the perspective of those they were speaking to and building bridges to the truth from that perspective. For example, when Jesus healed the paralytic in Mark 2:1-13, he knew that the Pharisees understood that only God alone can forgive sins (verse 6-7). So he said to the paralytic, “But in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sin, I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home.” (verses 10-11).

The apostle Paul had the same perspective in his interactions with others. For example, in Acts 28:23, Paul’s approach to the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks was to help them see that Jesus’ life and death was the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures, which they had already accepted. Yet, when Paul was speaking to the Epicureans and Stoics (humanists and polytheists) in Acts 17:22-29, he used another approach. His approach here was to speak first about their false beliefs about God and not about the person of Christ. So it is especially important that we too choose the best approach to gain a hearing with those we are trying to reach (1 Cor. 9:22).

Because of the problems we encounter today in evangelism, it is imperative then that we learn how to do pre-evangelism. In biblical terms this means that we need to put new wine in new wineskins in reaching the skeptics, pluralists, and postmodernists of our day (Matt. 9:17). Consequently, we will need to rethink our approach in evangelism and consider more carefully the critical role of asking thought-provoking questions to prepare the ground of people’s hearts and minds so that they are more willing to accept the seeds of the gospel. But to accomplish this, we will also need to consider the important role that Christian evidence can and should play in our evangelism process.