



Evangelism for Thinking People

Acts 17:16-33

September 17, 2006

One thing I'm learning about evangelism as we go through the Book of Acts together: you just never know who might respond to the gospel next. You can never count anyone out. The Book of Acts is a wild ride beginning in Jerusalem where the apostles were astonished to see thousands believe in the risen Jesus. Then those believers were astonished to see their despised neighbors, the Samaritans, coming to believe. And then who would have guessed that the Secretary of the Treasury of Ethiopia would believe? And then who would have guessed about the Roman Centurion in Caesarea? And then the gentiles in Antioch?! And then more gentiles up in Turkey?! And then the Holy Spirit blew Paul all the way into Europe, where even the jailer in Philippi believed! Paul and others were astonished to see people of all stations in life and all classes turning to Jesus: illiterate slave girls and well-connected merchants, rich and poor, men and women, slave and free, even leading men and women of European cities. It was breathtaking. And now here in the 17th chapter, the Holy Spirit dishes out one more surprise: even intellectuals come to believe! Now that has got to be the last kind of person you would expect.

The Spirit of God blew Paul into the city of Athens. Rome was the capitol of the Empire, but Athens was the capitol of the culture: art, philosophy, science, literature. Athens was the city of Plato and Pericles. Can the gospel "hold its own in the sophisticated intellectual environment of a university town?" (*Will Willimon, Anchor Commentary on Acts, p. 142*) Is the gospel even for intellectuals?

And why are we talking about this in Wilson today? Are there any intellectuals in Wilson? I don't think many people like being called an intellectual. Personally, I'd rather be called a redneck than an intellectual. Speaking of rednecks:

You know you're a redneck if your porch collapses and 12 hound dogs are killed underneath.

You know you're a redneck if you think a stock tip is advice on wormin' your hogs.

You know you're a redneck if you've been married three times and still have the same in-laws.

We like redneck jokes; we like to think there's a little redneck in each of us.

But how many of us like to think there's a little intellectual in each of us? In stead of Jeff Foxworthy telling redneck jokes on CMT, imagine William Friday telling intellectual jokes on PBS:

You know you're an intellectual if all your car radio buttons are preset for NPR.

You know you're an intellectual if you have more New Yorker magazines than TV Guides on your coffee table.

You know you're an intellectual if you have a pinup of Christianne Amanpour instead of Paris Hilton.

There's just not that many intellectual jokes out there – and maybe fewer people who would understand them.

None of us wants to be seen as a snobbish intellectual. But we do value education. Each year on a Sunday in June, we worship leaders get to put on all our academic regalia and then our high school seniors put on their caps and gowns and march in to the strains of "Pomp and Circumstance." We enjoy living in a town with Wilson Tech and Barton College close by. We're proud of our members who teach there. We're proud of all our people in education. They are doing important and holy work in this community in which so many fail to finish high school. Many of our educators have earned advanced degrees. And not only our educators: many of our business people have MBAs, our lawyers have law degrees, and more.

So while we don't like to be called snobbish intellectuals, we do value education. We do value being a thinking person. And time and time again, we are confronted by the question: can a thinking person really believe in the Christian faith? Is the gospel for thinking people, even for intellectuals?

Many people will tell you that no truly thinking person would be interested in the gospel. And some Christians are afraid that if they tried to share their faith with a thinking person or intellectual, that they would just not equipped to communicate and connect with them.

The stakes are high on this question, because our young people do think. They are smart. They ask questions, like, "If Adam and Eve were the first human beings, then how did their sons find wives?" Or questions like, "I'm studying genetics. Can I be a scientist and a Christian at the same time? Or should I check my mind in at the door when I come to church?" It is vital that we in the church give our young people the tools to apply the faith to modern minds, and to apply modern minds to the faith. After all, Jesus commanded us to "love the Lord your God with all your MIND." That's the kind of important work that goes on in "The Graduates" class that Wes Hill teaches on Sunday

mornings, or that will go on in the new “Graduates P.M.” group that has begun on Thursday evenings (7:30 at Bojangles on Airport Road).

Is the gospel for thinking people? That was the question when Paul walked into the marketplace of Athens, the intellectual center of his world. He began telling the good news of Jesus to all who would listen, including philosophers of Stoicism and philosophers of Epicureanism. Some called him an intellectual lightweight who merely picked scraps of wisdom and strung them together like a freshman term paper. Others were curious. Others were bored and just wanted to have some fun with this preacher. So they brought him to the city lecture hall called the Areopagus. Ever so politely they asked, “May we know what this new teaching of yours is?”

Paul began, “I notice that you are very religious, so religious that you even have an altar for ‘an unknown God.’ I am here to tell you about that unknown God.” Paul had them hooked. He told them of the God that no one could ever create out of silver or gold, but who was the Creator of all. He told them of the God who has been behind the rise and fall of every nation. He told them of the God that we all search for as if we were in a pitch dark room fumbling for the door.

Paul told them that so far God has overlooked people’s ignorance of him; but no more, for that God has set a day on which God will judge the world “through a man whom He has appointed” (*Acts 17:31 Williams*) -- through a man that God raised from the dead.

So Paul, with a room full of the intellectuals of Athens, most of whom had never read the Scriptures, brought them all the way from their unknown god to the risen Jesus. He started where they were and brought them all the way to the empty tomb, even to the risen Christ, before whom every knee shall bow.

So what was their reaction? Some of them mocked him in that wry, tired way that only intellectuals can do. Some of them politely put Paul off, saying, “We would like to hear more sometime later. Uh, we’ll call you.” But as Paul walked out of that lecture hall, a few people followed after him. One of the twelve members of the Academy of the Areopagus, Dionysius, came to believe. “...also a woman named Damaris, and some others.” (*Acts 17:34*) It wasn’t three thousand converts on Pentecost, but that didn’t make it any less astonishing: the gospel was for intellectuals, too!

Thinking people CAN respond to the gospel. And more than that, thinking people can TELL the gospel. Intellectuals make good evangelists. Three summers ago I was in summer school in England at Oxford University. (I had the great fortune to find a course you didn’t have to have grades to get into.) I saw a flyer about a lecture by the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenburg that was open to the public. I had heard of him, so I went. What I witnessed was an evangelistic event. Not that it was like any evangelism that we usually think of. There was no famous athlete, no former drug addict. There was no rousing music and no verses of “Just As I Am.” There was just a quiet man with a German accent speaking on the subject “Space and Time” to a group of Oxford

intellectuals. But it was a bold act of evangelism! As I struggled to keep up with him, I realized that he was making a case for God to these cultured despisers of religion. And he was even challenging his audience not to dismiss the resurrection too quickly. In other words, Pannenburg was doing the same thing in Oxford that Paul had done in Athens: he met his hearers where they were, he described how the one God is greater than all our categories and concepts, and then he led his hearers to the resurrected Christ.

Another great mind who is proclaiming Christ to thinking people today is Frances Collins. As a boy, his family did not go to church. But as an adult, Dr. Collins became a follower of Christ. He is also a world famous geneticist, who led the project to decode the whole human genome: the whole sequence of amino acids that together form a double helix of human DNA. This year, Dr. Collins has written a book titled, The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief. In it, Collins challenges atheists and agnostics. He also challenges Christians who reject science for creationism or intelligent design. Dr. Collins makes the case for what he calls “pro-theistic evolution.” He believes that evolution is a tool in the hands of the almighty and infinite God. And thus, Frances Collins removes a stumbling block that has been hindering many thoughtful people from becoming followers of Jesus!

Let me recommend to you another thoughtful evangelist. She is Lauren Winner. She’s barely out of her twenties and already an up and coming author. One of her books, titled Girl Meets God, is the story of how she, a lover of careful thought and great writing, came to Christ. Lauren grew up in the Blue Ridge Mountains and went to Columbia University in Manhattan and then on to Cambridge University in England. Her heritage was Judaism. Her studies drew her to Jesus. And along the way, she got hooked on the Mitford books by Jan Karon. Now, those books weren’t exactly classical literature, but the stories touched her heart and confirmed her reasoning. Lauren Winner is one of a new generation of thoughtful evangelists who will reach people that traditional evangelists could never touch.

And finally let me recommend to you one more set of thoughtful evangelists: you. I know you don’t see yourselves as intellectuals, but across the years, I’ve come to know you pretty well, and here is one thing I love about you: you use your heads. You are people with great hearts, and this is a warm church, but you also like to use your heads. I see this in your Sunday Bible studies. I hear this in the brilliant questions of your children. I remember this as I prepare my sermons, because I know that you do not tolerate sloppy thinking in the pulpit!

One day Charles Bailey asked me to come over to the home of his father Thurman, whose funeral I had done months ago. Charles showed me his dad’s personal library, and invited me to take whatever books I wanted. There was George Buttrick’s Sermons Preached in a University Church, Helmut Thielicke’s The Silence of God, Augustine’s Confessions, Emil Brunner’s commentary on Romans. And of course, there

were various translations of the Bible. Thurman Bailey was no college professor. He was an auto parts dealer. But like the Scriptures say, Mr. Bailey studied to show himself approved, a workman who properly presents the word of truth. (*2 Timothy 2:15*) And in the way he handled his business, and in the way he taught that junior high boys' Sunday School class, Thurman Bailey was a great evangelist. He was a thinking man, who could unfold the gospel for thinking people.

You can do that too.

-- Douglas E. Murray