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A Relevant Evangelistic Appeal with the Unchurched

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Abstract: Typically, we use Acts 16:31 as the model for our evangelistic appeal: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.” However, our use of it is a faulty interpretation of the passage and is quite incomprehensible to our unchurched audience. The terms in this appeal (“believe,” “Lord Jesus Christ,” “be saved”) make no sense to this audience. Our appeal must be presented differently, in a manner that speaks to their understanding and situation.

“Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved!” This is the conversion call that has been used even to this day. In the original context, it was St. Paul’s response to the Philippian jailer’s desperate shout, “What must I do to be saved.” He was not thinking of eternal salvation, of course. He was considering suicide (Acts 16:25–34).

Irrespective of the original context, we have continued to use Paul’s response as our evangelistic call. We use it to talk about eternal salvation. However, that statement had a different meaning then, and it has a different meaning today. In fact, it has no meaning today. Outside of confined church circles, that statement makes no sense at all.

“Believe”

When I was teaching religion classes at Concordia University–Portland, this was a term I had come to avoid when talking about the faith. Outside of the faith community, the term may often mean “blind belief”—a decision to accept something without any evidence as to its truth, even accepting something as true that is contrary to evidence.

When the “James Ossuary” was discovered in 2002, there was a discussion as to



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whether it contained the bones of Jesus. I heard an Easter morning sermon at that time referring to this discovery. The preacher argued that there is a difference between the truth of faith and other truths: We believe in spite of the evidence. The fact is, though, that our faith is a lie if those are Jesus' bones. If people outside church circles heard that preacher's statement, they would roll their eyes in amazement at our willfully blind belief.

So what term did I use in class and what term do I suggest we use? I would say "I am personally convinced" or "I have come to understand" or "It seems clear to me," or "My experience is," etc. The idea is that we have grounds and worthy reasons for our beliefs. In a previous *Missio Apostolica* article¹, I shared how I found the most effective way to witness to nonbelievers is to speak of my experiences with miracles, spirits, angels, etc. They want tangible evidence, and that's a way to provide it.

The idea is that we have grounds and worthy reasons for our beliefs.

"On the Lord Jesus"

Who is Jesus to these unchurched people? What does the word *lord* mean to them?

Many studies have documented how there is rampant biblical illiteracy in our country, particularly among the younger generations. In my experience, most have little idea of the actions and claims of Jesus in Scripture. Most know that Christmas is a celebration of Jesus' birth, but not that it's a recognition of His Incarnation. Many do not realize that Easter is connected to Jesus' resurrection.

Who is Jesus to them? They've heard He was a very loving person, and they like Him for that. But He is interpreted in terms of the desires of the day. Two examples:

- On the first day of a freshman Bible course, one of our Concordia profs asked if the students knew any Bible verses. He reported that the only verse that most could recall was, "Do not judge." That was a saying of Jesus that they could relate to.
- When I was a pastor in Wisconsin, a parishioner related to me what she overheard at a jewelry counter in a department store. A customer had asked about getting a necklace with a cross pendant. The saleslady asked, "Do you want one with the little man on it?"

What, then, does Jesus have to do with me and my life today, they might ask? As James White has discussed thoroughly in *Rise of the Nones*, the unchurched simply do not see any need for religion in their lives. Since my retirement and my increased involvement with unchurched community members, they also admire Jesus but have no need for Him. Jesus was a good man back then, and He could be a good example

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for us today. But “lord” is not a word that they would associate with Him, except as a kind of honorific like “fine sir.” The biblical sense of lord as focus and director of one’s life is far from their understanding, and even further from their need or desire.

What, then, does Jesus have to do with me and my life today, they might ask?

Add to this another term related to Jesus: *Christ*. There is no understanding of Jesus as the Messiah, of course. The term *Jesus Christ* is primarily known as an expletive, certainly not as something publicly sacred and personally meaningful.

What does the evangelistic appeal “Believe on the Lord Jesus (Christ)” mean, then? Nothing. In summary, they understand that He did live and that He was a good man and we might learn something from Him. And here will come some ideas on how we might effectively approach them. But first we have one more phrase in that evangelistic appeal to consider:

“You will be saved.”

In the original context of the Philippian jailer, the salvation he sought is quite clear: rescue from the wrath and punishment of his superiors. His immediate salvation was the amazing fact that none of the prisoners had tried to escape. He was saved. His amazement at his prisoners’ consideration of his plight led him to respect and listen to them, and the Holy Spirit subsequently worked faith in his heart and with him his whole household. Paul and Silas shared the jailer’s experience of being vulnerable and helpless so that they could openheartedly share what the lordship of Jesus means “to those such as us.”

But what does “saved” mean to our listeners today? What might they want to be saved from? What might convince them to listen to “the word of the Lord,” like the jailer?

The jailer was not thinking of eternal life, and the young people today are not thinking of that either. One context in which the term *saved* has relevance for them is getting saved from addictions. They have seen how addictions can have an insurmountable stranglehold on people’s lives. They can resonate with the first two steps of the Twelve Step Program of Alcoholic Anonymous:

We admit that we are powerless (over alcohol)—and that our lives have become unmanageable.

We come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity.

We would call this stranglehold the work of Satan or our sinful flesh. Of course, these are not terms that make any sense to the unchurched and biblically illiterate. However, the content of these biblical terms does make sense. Young people know many friends and family who need to be saved from their addictions.

From my time in India, I know a significant follower of Jesus who came to faith by reading Romans 7. He recognized his own insane and unmanageable struggles of life in the words of St. Paul: “Wretched man that I am! Who can deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom 7:24). He recognized his own life experience in these words of Scripture, came to study more, and accepted Jesus as the lord of his renewed and redirected life, expressing “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (v. 25a).

A Relevant Evangelistic Appeal

We now have gained some clues and ideas on how we might proceed in our evangelical witness. Simply citing the biblical verse will get us nowhere because for people who do not believe, the Bible has no authority. However, the content of Paul’s appeal still is relevant to the human condition. How might we convey the content of that appeal to the unchurched around us today?

In the above discussion, we identified three points of contact:

- We might learn something from Jesus.
- Amazement at believers’ consideration and understanding
- Powerful help in our insane, unmanageable condition

Those three points might be summarized in an appeal such as this: “Let’s discuss together the life and meaning of Jesus for us today, especially when life becomes insane and unmanageable.” We do not approach the appeal from a standpoint of one who knows and is now informing. Rather, we recognize our mutual vulnerability and needful condition, and we share what Jesus’ lordship has meant to us.

This leads to one final consideration in our approach to witnessing among the unchurched today. It must be done primarily by laypeople. The witnesses to the faith must be seen as trustworthy and credible. Unfortunately, the common view of clergy in our country today is not conducive to credible witnessing.

There’s always been a question of authenticity when paid, professional clergy share the faith, for “that’s their job.” However, today many more issues of credibility

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and trustworthiness have arisen: from child abusers to protectors of abusers, from views considered anti-scientific and anti-gay and anti-women, from mixing of church with partisan politics, from greedy TV evangelists. And who is the point person for all this disillusionment and distrust?—the clergy.

Peter Marty, in his lead editorial in an issue of *The Christian Century*, quoted a recent Gallup Poll.² Since 1977, Gallup has been charting the reputations of different occupations, and high regard for the clergy has deteriorated to the lowest it has ever been, only 36 percent. Even among those who attend church at least monthly, only 52 percent consider the clergy trustworthy.

The point is that effective witnessing mostly needs to be done by laypeople, people whom others consider trustworthy and credible. Clergy need to equip their parishioners (Eph 4:12) to connect meaningfully, discussing openheartedly the meaning of Jesus in the struggles of life.

Endnotes

¹ “Outreach to Atheists,” *Missio Apostolica* 22, no. 1 (May 2014): 149–150.

² “Can clergy regain trust?” *The Christian Century* (August 14, 2019), 3.