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Is it Possible to Share an Effective Witness in Modern Society?

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Recently, LifeWay Research did a survey called the *2019 Discipleship Pathway Assessment*. Part of that survey, conducted Jan. 14 - 29, was designed to gauge Christian evangelism efforts. What they found is that there is an overall excitement and eagerness among Christians about the idea of evangelism. However, "few Protestant churchgoers actually engaged in the practice on a regular basis."

More specifically, they found that just over half (55 percent) of those who attend church at least once a month have not shared with someone how to become a Christian in the past six months. Additionally, they found that "a majority of churchgoers (56 percent) say they pray for opportunities to tell others about Jesus at least once a week, with 23 percent praying for such moments every day. Also, 27 percent said they rarely or never pray for those opportunities.

These statistics show that there is at least a desire among those who self-identify as Christian to share their faith, but that very few actually take the initiative to do it. So what is the problem? It seems to me that the biggest problem is that the majority of Christians in modern society have simply not adapted to the post-Christian/postmodern world we live in.

It is undeniable that American society has undergone a radical change in the last fifty years. American society used to be quite homogenous when it came to worldview beliefs. America was established upon a Christian worldview foundation. This does not mean that everyone was a Chris-

tian, but the principles upon which the societal institutions were established were decidedly biblical beliefs. The core beliefs assume that the God of the Bible exists, and has revealed to mankind the moral principles that should govern society. Additionally, the founders believed that man was fallen and needed mechanisms in place to make sure our fallenness did not destroy society. To that end, they established a constitution that put restrictions on what government and politicians could do, in order to limit injustice and tyranny.

Fast forward to today and the homogeneity has evaporated. We now live in a society that is more pluralistic than at any time in our history. This is not a problem when it comes to the vast expansion of ethnicities that now occupy society. The problem comes when the pluralism leaks out into worldview beliefs. And that is exactly what is now happening. In our modern day, the major institutions of society have come to be dominated by a naturalistic worldview, and the Christian Theism of the past has been profoundly watered down. The problem that this creates is that the very principles that govern the operation of these institutions has shifted in a way that has put in place an entirely different moral foundation. This dramatically changes the very operation of society, and the tension that this change has created is on full display every day in the news.

But this change in society has also created a new difficulty for Christians who want to share their faith. For the most part, sharing Christ now requires a different mindset than it did when America was religiously homogeneous. The gospel never changes, but the way we must interact with society to share our message has

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changed radically. The big problem is that, for the most part, our church people still live in a paradigm that is long gone. The outcome is seen in the above mentioned Lifeway survey. The truth is, there is still a great spiritual void in people's lives, and non-believers do feel a need for Christ. But most Christians, either out of fear or not knowing what to do, simply don't share their faith. The truth is, adjusting to this new paradigm is not so difficult, but it is different from what we have done in the past. And until believers make the effort to learn the difference, the frustration will continue.

In order to explain this further, we are going to take a few moments to contrast and explain the differences between the traditional approach and the new paradigm that we now need to use.

Traditional Witnessing Method

When everyone you wish to share a witness to already holds a theistic worldview, there is no need to even think about worldview concepts. The people you speak with already believe in the existence of God (even if they have not received him, or they believe in a different God). As such, all that is necessary is to explain the gospel message so that they can have the opportunity to accept Christ.

And that is exactly the situation that used to exist in America. Because of that, methodologies for sharing Christ developed that assumed people already understood Theism. As a result, methods such as The Romans Road, The Four Spiritual Laws, Evangelism Explosion, FAITH, and other similar witnessing programs became popular. Each had its own unique way of sharing the message, but all started in the same place – with the assumption that the listener already believed in the existence of God.

Witnessing in Our Increasingly Pluralistic Society

That was a good approach when society was homogenous and based on Christian Theism. And it will still work fine when dealing with people who have a theistic background. However, it does not work as well in a pluralistic society where many don't understand or believe theistic concepts. To deal with people who don't already believe in the existence of God, we have to begin in a different place.

For the rest of this article, I am going to focus on Naturalists because Naturalism is the worldview that dominates in modern American society. Understand, though, that the same principles apply when dealing with people who come from any non-theistic belief system. The most basic principle is that we must begin where they are.

Naturalists simply don't believe the presuppositions of Theism. They believe that the natural universe is all that exists, so there is no God and no transcendent reality. With that as a starting point, they believe everything, in all of reality, can be explained based on the natural laws of the universe.

As such, when witnessing to a Naturalist (of any stripe) you can't begin simply with the gospel message – because they don't believe the underlying premise that Christian Theism is built upon; they don't believe God even exists.

Thus, we have to start at a more basic level and help them first see the problems that are inherent in their own naturalistic beliefs. From there, it becomes possible to:

- 1) move them to a place where they will be willing to listen to another possibility,
- 2) then to a place where they are able to comprehend theistic concepts,
- 3) and finally, to share with them the actual gospel message.

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Sharing Christ with this in mind does not lend itself to the kind of formulaic approach that has been used in years past (until you get to the gospel presentation itself). Up until that point, you are dealing with individuals who have their own unique obstacles to understanding – obstacles that you will have to work through. As such, what we will now share is a process that you can use to lead a person to that understanding.

1. Start with an Issue They Support

In Acts 17, the apostle Paul was in a situation where he was interacting with people who held a non-theistic worldview. In that case, the environment he was operating in was an animistic society. While many of the people Paul was dealing with were not themselves Animists, they were immersed in a society that was dominated by an animistic worldview. Thus, at the very least, they all grasped animistic concepts. So Paul used that as a bridge to share Christ. He started where they were by acknowledging the many gods that were worshiped. Then, he picked out one god that they acknowledged but did not know – the "unknown god." His hearers were willing to listen because it fit their paradigm. But when he made his explanation, he did not share an animistic god, but the Christian theistic one. The main point here, is that Paul started his witness using ideas they were conceptually able to comprehend.

Understand, here, that while Naturalists assert that they are not religious, the truth is, they are very religious. Their entire worldview is based upon their belief that the natural universe is all that exists. The problem this belief presents for them is that there is no science to back it up. Thus, their religious beliefs are expressed as secular notions, even though the foundation for those notions are based purely on faith.

Thus, when you engage the faith of Naturalists, you are going to be engaging in an arena that seems to be secular. You will deal with such things as political issues, environmental causes, moral beliefs, the nature of life, the actual nature of science, the nature of the law, the purpose of education, the nature of social values, economic theory, the value of media and entertainment, healthcare, and the like. When Naturalists speak of these things, they do not, and will not, speak of them in religious terms. But make no mistake about it, they are expressing religious ideas. And if you wish to share an understandable witness to them, you are going to have to recognize the religious nature of their beliefs and learn how to use that as a bridge to point them to Christ.

Let's take one example just to illustrate the point. One popular issue of Naturalists is evolution. True Naturalists will go to the mat with you asserting that it is settled science that all current life forms evolved from less complex forms. However, that is purely a faith position. When Naturalists speak of evolution, they will tend to give examples based on the process of natural selection (also called micro-evolution) – which can be legitimately demonstrated by science. They will then use that known scientific process to assert that macro-evolution (evolution from less to more complex life forms) is also true. The only problem is, there is no actual science to demonstrate that macro-evolution is even possible. They believe it by faith.

2. Help Them See the Presuppositional Foundation of Their Position

It is important to remember, at this point, that for most individuals, worldview beliefs are completely unconscious. People generally simply assume that their worldview beliefs

are true, and that opposing points of view are fantasy. As such, it will be necessary to help the person see the faith nature of their beliefs.

In the case of Naturalism, Naturalists really do believe that their beliefs are based on science, and that Christian beliefs are purely faith. It becomes necessary, then, to help them see the faith nature of their own beliefs. There is no science to support any of their most foundational beliefs:

- 1) that the material that makes up the natural universe had a natural origin,
- 2) that life emerged from non-life,
- 3) that the variety of life forms in existence came into being by natural means (the belief about evolution), and
- 4) that consciousness came from non-consciousness.

All of these are necessary for Naturalism to be true, and every Naturalist believes all of these to be true. However, there is no way to demonstrate these four notions using their own bottom line beliefs – that everything can be explained using empirical science. They believe all of these by faith.

As you interact with an individual Naturalist, it will generally be difficult for them to be willing to even admit that you could be right. That is because the very nature of worldview beliefs push against it. They believe their own beliefs reflect reality and yours reflect fantasy. You may have to engage the person for an extended period of time to finally get them see (and to admit) that their beliefs truly are "beliefs." Generally the best way to do that is to ask them a lot of questions that make them justify their contention that their beliefs are based on science (Ex. Show me the scientific research that demonstrates naturalistic evolution (macro-evolution) is possible. Show me the scientific research that proves life emerged from non-life. Etc.). If you are persistent and consistent, at some point they will recognize that their beliefs are, indeed, based on faith.

3. Share with them another possibility

The final step is to share with your Naturalist friend a different possibility. Of course, the different possibility you want to share is the gospel message.

It is quite possible, though, that many of them will not understand the worldview basis for the Christian faith. Thus, before you share the gospel message itself, it may be necessary to share the worldview context for the Christian faith. This can be done in five easy steps:

1. Creation - An objectively real, transcendent God exists. This God is holy and will not allow unholiness into his presence. He is also personal, and he made the natural universe for a purpose. That purpose was to create a being (human beings) that he could engage in a personal relationship. The human beings he created, along with the creation itself, was perfect in every way.
2. Fall - After initially enjoying an unhindered relationship with mankind on the earth, man was tempted by Satan to rebel against God, and yielded to that temptation.
3. Life after the Fall - The resulting sin created a separation of man from God, and a corruption of the natural universe. Since man was responsible for the sin, and God is a God of justice, the penalty for it (spiritual death - separation from God) would have to be paid by the transgressor.
4. Redemption - Since God is a God of love, he determined not to let the Fall stand, and created a means by which the brokenness could be repaired. This involved the sacrificial death of a perfect man (one without sin) who would receive the punishment for man's sin by substituting himself for the one who should receive the penalty. As no mortal human could accomplish this task, God himself took the form of a man (Jesus Christ), lived a perfect life on earth to become eligible to be the substitute, then died on the cross to accomplish the sacrifice. He then rose from the dead, proving he had authority over sin and death, and was worthy. This redemption can be received by individual human beings as they repent of their sin and willingly accept the sacrificial gift God provided.
5. Eternity - Those who receive God's gift are judicially forgiven by God, have the relationship with him restored, and are eligible to spend eternity in his presence. At a time he chooses, God will make a perfect

new heaven and new earth to replace the one tainted by sin, bodily resurrect those who received him, and dwell together with them in this new paradise as was his original intention – thus fulfilling his original purpose.

Once individuals understand the concept of biblical Theism, it then becomes possible to share with them HOW they can personally enter into this relationship with God. This is the time for sharing the gospel message itself, and one can use one of the methods mentioned earlier. Of course, this does not guarantee that the individual will actually receive Christ, as that is their own personal choice, but at this point, there should be total clarity concerning the possibility.

Is it Possible?

So now we are back to the original question: Is it possible to share an effective Christian witness in modern society? And the answer? ABSOLUTELY YES!!! The life changing gospel of Christ represents the truth about the very nature of reality. People can intellectually reject reality, but they cannot escape it. Apart from God, every person is separated from the very reason for their existence. It is possible to personally ignore it, but no one can escape it. It is actual reality. Knowing God through Jesus Christ is the only way a person can ever find ultimate peace and contentment – and this wonderful message of life can be effectively communicated to anyone who is separated from Christ.

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