Three challenges for evangelism in the 21st Century

- **Post-Christendom suspicion** – an imbalanced view of the legacy of Christendom has left an impression that the Church is really only interested in power and control, wanting to dictate what people should believe. In the post-Christendom world, Bryan Stone suggests that, “An evangelistic church is called to patience, obedience, and martyrdom rather than effectiveness, control, or success”. He adds that, “with adequate clarification”, evangelism in this context could be defined as “the practice of offering the gospel in such a way that it can be rejected responsibly”.  
- **Postmodern scepticism** – presenting God’s truth has become doubly challenging since, whereas modernity questioned God’s existence, postmodernity questions truth’s existence.
- **Post-Fall sinfulness** – we must not forget that the primary reason why people reject the gospel is not because of cultural trends, but because of the effects of sin on their lives. We must be prayerful in evangelism, recognising that conversion requires God to shine His light in hearts, but confident that He does this through our clear and faithful proclamation of the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:1-6). We need great confidence in the gospel.

Avoiding unnecessary offence

There is an unavoidable offence inherent in the gospel. When the message of the cross confronts the rebelliousness of the sinful heart, sparks will fly. People ensnared in Satan’s lies may perceive an attack on those false ideas as an attack on them. There are, however, three sources of unnecessary offence that are implicit in the following words from Scripture:

“In your hearts give Christ the supreme place He deserves. Be constantly prepared to make a case for your hope to anyone who asks you about it, but do it gently and in fear [of God], with a clear conscience, so that people who falsely claim that being in Christ leads to bad behaviour will be put to shame when the evidence is examined”  
(1 Peter 3:15-16, my paraphrase).

a) **Ignorance**: we need insight – taking time to listen and to understand others is an integral part of honouring them, acknowledging the value they have in God’s sight. People will want to know the reason for our hope, but we need to listen to them in order to hear their questions and to be able to connect the gospel with their lives.

b) **Arrogance**: we need humility – ”Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread” (D. T. Niles). Humility is the cardinal Christian virtue that results from the gospel. Its absence is a denial of the gospel. Humility derives from fear of God and confidence that Jesus is Lord expressed in consecration to Him.

c) **Hypocrisy**: we need integrity – our words must be supported by individual lives and Church communities that demonstrate the attractiveness of the gospel.

Boldness in evangelism rests on these three foundations: insightful understanding of the beliefs and lives of others; humble trust in Christ’s sovereignty; and integrity in our lives as we embody the transforming power of the gospel.

Which story do we live in?

Everyone lives, unconsciously or consciously, within a story which might be called their ‘worldview’. Contemporary Western society is dominated by two conflicting worldviews: modernism (or naturalistic atheism) and postmodernism. Most people live with some mixture of these two worldviews – for example, they trust in science when they need medical care (modern), but they are suspicious of political and religious structures (postmodern). The clashing values of these alternative stories create much confusion for contemporary people. Cutting across both prevailing stories, however, is the true story of human life, which is the story of the Bible – God’s story of creation and redemption.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The ‘modern’ story</th>
<th>The ‘postmodern’ story</th>
<th>The Christian story</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ultimate reality</strong></td>
<td>An ultimately meaningless world of physical stuff (materialism)</td>
<td>God, the good and just Creator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Human nature</strong></td>
<td>Genes and environment determine behaviour</td>
<td>Autonomous (self-actualising) individuals full of potential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>History’s turning point</strong></td>
<td>The ‘Enlightenment’ and the dawn of the age of reason</td>
<td>There was none – there is no big story</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Meaning can be found in</strong></td>
<td>The true nature of the world, unearthed through reason</td>
<td>Relationships (uncommitted) and experiences (varied)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The future</strong></td>
<td>Progress of humankind and posterity by passing on genes</td>
<td>Uncertain</td>
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Despite the challenges posed by postmodernism, Ravi Zacharias identifies five windows of opportunity it presents: ²

1. It has cleared the playing field of alternative final authorities.
2. Enough of the modern worldview remains for reason to have a point of entry.
3. Postmodern people search for community.
4. God intervenes sovereignly in history, creating moments when the world questions.
5. People have exhausted themselves with pleasure seeking.

In addition to Zacharias’s assertion that postmodern people seek community, in our engagement with the contemporary world, the Church is vitally important for at least three other reasons:

- Christian disunity is the greatest barrier to the gospel. The Church is an essential part of the Gospel story.
- The Church nourishes and equips believers for their engagement in the world.
- It is in local congregations of the Church (despite their imperfections) that the reality of the gospel and the renewed creation it promises is displayed as people gather together in Christ’s name and learn to love one another.

### Three strategies

#### a) Dialogue – spiritual conversation

Dialogue (as frequently practiced by the apostle Paul) aims to achieve a fair understanding of alternative beliefs that can move both participants towards the truth. It does not entail leaving aside our convictions, but requires us to listen in humility to the beliefs of others, being prepared to correct our own wrong ideas, as well as clearly and confidently explaining what we believe. An important aspect of this is telling our personal story of faith with confidence. It is worthwhile to take time to summarise a three minute version of your story of faith (your testimony). It is helpful to include the following three categories (as recommended in the Becoming a Contagious Christian course):

1. B.C. (before you knew Christ) – what did you believe and how did you first hear the gospel?
2. † (how you became a Christian) – what did it mean for you to come to faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord?
3. A.D. (after you became a Christian) – how has being a Christian changed you or shaped your life?

#### b) Apologetics – defending the faith

Apologetics means making a reasoned defence of the Christian faith. People are sometimes put off by the idea of arguing for their faith, but there is a difference between arguing your case and being quarrelsome: “People generally quarrel because they cannot argue” (G.K. Chesterton).³ We need to learn to argue for Christianity in the light of alternative worldviews, helping people to see that it is “both true and reasonable” (Acts 26:25).

#### c) Evangelism – sharing the gospel

The gospel is not simply a list of four propositional statements that must be acknowledged as true. It is the true story of the world and of our lives in it, which centres on the person of Jesus and His death and resurrection. We need to learn to present the gospel as a story, but in doing so we can helpfully remember five points in the story. As we share with people, we may ask which point they are sticking at and how we can help them move along to the next point:

1. GOD (the Father) created the universe and is its rightful ruler, utterly good and just. This creator God loves us, so He has spoken through history and Scripture.
2. WE (the bad life) have rebelled against Him in sin, resulting in death and a curse upon the whole of creation.
3. GOD (the Son) planned our rescue through the history of Israel, centring on Christ.
4. WE (the good life) must respond to God in repentance in faith, acknowledging Jesus as the Lord and trusting Him as our Saviour.
5. GOD (the Spirit) will transform us, include us in God’s redeemed people (the Church), empower us to serve God and keep us secure until God restores the universe.

### Taking it further

- ‘With Christ in the School of Evangelism’ a 6-week Evening Class course led by Andrew Kenny starting 12th Jan 2016 in Belfast Bible College (call 028 9030 1551 or email info@belfastbiblecollege.com for more details).
- For apologetics training, consider the Reality 3:16 course in Portrush (www.reality316.org) or register your interest in future Evening Classes at Belfast Bible College.
- For apologetics resources see the ‘Apologetics’ page of my website (under the ‘Resources’ tab on www.paulcoulter.net) and UCCF’s Be Thinking website (www.bethinking.org).

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