

## **The Gospel for a Pagan World – Part 4**

**1 Corinthians 9:19** For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.

**1 Corinthians 9:20** To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law;

**1 Corinthians 9:21** to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law.

**1 Corinthians 9:22** To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.

**1 Corinthians 9:23** I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

Paul is not saying he is changing the gospel to win souls. He was not a “post-modern” preacher. No, he is saying he adapts to his audience. Know your audience. Find common ground on which to start the gospel. For some, “Are you saved?” means something. But many today have no

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clue. In that case, it may be necessary to go back to “There is a God,” and “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” That is what Paul had to do in Acts chapter 17 when he was in Athens, Greece.

I remember a philosophy student at college. Once he was going to debate someone informally. The first thing he did was set up a starting point, something both sides of the argument might agree on. When his opponent said he couldn't agree on a starting point, the philosophy major said he could not debate his opponent. If there was no agreed upon starting point, then there would be no fruitful dialogue.

The same rule applies to giving someone the gospel. If your audience, whether that is one person or several, if you cannot agree on some common starting point then it may be useless to proceed. The Holy Spirit will have to intervene.

This happened to me. As a new believer in college, I was walking with a Moslem man who was a fellow student in one of my Physics classes. I felt a need to give him the gospel but didn't know how to start, how to connect with him. I knew little about Islam. All of a sudden, this man turned to me and asked me if I knew anything about God. I chalk it up to intervention by the Holy Spirit.

This series of lessons on the “Gospel for a Pagan World” is based upon Eric Metaxas' book, “Is Atheism Dead?” It is a “reversal” of the 1966 Time Magazine cover story “Is God Dead?” Metaxas makes five points in his book. These points were key issues atheists used to attack the Bible and Christian faith. In the past century, the development of our knowledge has started to reverse these points as issues against atheism.

1. The Big Bang Theory [The case for creation]
2. Fine Tuning [The case for purpose and design of creation]

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3. Abiogenesis [The case for the creation of life]
4. Archaeology [The inerrancy of the Bible]
5. [The New] Atheism [The case for examining the truth]

This week, we will conclude this series by looking first at the “New Atheists,” then looking at a couple of Atheists who became Christians and then finishing by looking at Paul giving the gospel to Greeks in Athens. How did he communicate to them?

Here is some background on New Atheism from Wikipedia. Note, it appears to be written from an atheist point of view.

“The term *New Atheism* was coined by the journalist Gary Wolf in 2006 to describe the positions promoted by some atheists of the twenty-first century. New Atheism advocates the view that superstition, religion and irrationalism should not simply be tolerated. Instead, they should be countered, criticized, and challenged by rational argument, especially when they exert undue influence, such as in government, education, and politics.”

“New Atheism often criticised what writers such as Richard Dawkins described as the indoctrination of children and the social harms caused by perpetuating ideologies founded on belief in the supernatural. At the time, critics of the movement deployed pejorative terms such as militant atheism and fundamentalist atheism to malign vocal atheists.”

There are four vocal proponents of the “New” Atheism. Per Wikipedia: “On 30 September 2007, four prominent atheists (Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett) met at Hitchens' residence in Washington, D.C., for a private two-hour unmoderated discussion. The event was videotaped and titled "The Four Horsemen"” This event is available on YouTube for those that are interested.

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The following bios of the “Four Horsemen” are from Wikipedia.

“Richard Dawkins FRS FRSL (born 26 March 1941) is a British evolutionary biologist and author. He is an emeritus fellow of New College, Oxford, and was Professor for Public Understanding of Science in the University of Oxford from 1995 to 2008. An atheist, he is well known for his criticism of creationism and intelligent design.”

“Samuel Benjamin Harris (born April 9, 1967) is an American philosopher, neuroscientist, author, public intellectual and podcast host. His work touches on a wide range of topics, including rationality, religion, ethics, free will, neuroscience, meditation, psychedelics, philosophy of mind, politics, terrorism, and artificial intelligence. Harris came to prominence for his criticism of religion, and Islam in particular, and is known as one of the "Four Horsemen" of New Atheism, along with Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett.”

“Christopher Eric Hitchens (13 April 1949 – 15 December 2011) was a British-American author, journalist, orator and columnist. He wrote, co-wrote, edited or co-edited over 30 books, including five of essays on culture, politics and literature. “

“Hitchens described himself as an anti-theist, who saw all religions as false, harmful and authoritarian. He argued for free expression and scientific discovery, and asserted that they were superior to religion as an ethical code of conduct for human civilisation. He also advocated separation of church and state. The dictum "What can be asserted without evidence can also be dismissed without evidence" has become known as Hitchens's razor.”

“Daniel Clement Dennett III (born March 28, 1942) is an American philosopher, writer, and cognitive scientist whose research centers on the philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, and philosophy of biology,

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particularly as those fields relate to evolutionary biology and cognitive science.”

“Dennett is an atheist and secularist, a member of the Secular Coalition for America advisory board, and a member of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, as well as an outspoken supporter of the Brights movement. Dennett is referred to as one of the "Four Horsemen of New Atheism", along with Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens.”

Read the blog post by Chris Stedman from the Huffpost.com

Reza Aslan (from Wikipedia) Reza Aslan (Persian: رضا اسلان, IPA: [ˈrezoː æsˈlɒːn]; born May 3, 1972) is an Iranian-American scholar of sociology of religion, writer, and television host. A convert to evangelical Christianity from Shia Islam as a youth, Aslan eventually reverted to Islam but continued to write about Christianity.”

Here is an excerpt from that article this is a quote from Reza Aslan:

*“There is, as has often been noted, something peculiarly evangelistic about what has been termed the new atheist movement... It is no exaggeration to describe the movement popularized by the likes of Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens as a new and particularly zealous form of fundamentalism -- an atheist fundamentalism. The parallels with religious fundamentalism are obvious and startling: the conviction that they are in sole possession of truth (scientific or otherwise), the troubling lack of tolerance for the views of their critics (Dawkins has compared creationists to Holocaust deniers), the insistence on a literalist reading of scripture (more literalist, in fact, than one finds among most religious fundamentalists), the simplistic reductionism of the religious phenomenon, and, perhaps most bizarrely, their overwhelming sense of siege: the belief that they*

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*have been oppressed and marginalized by Western societies and are just not going to take it anymore.”*

There are a number of notable atheists who “converted” to Christianity. This doesn’t always mean they became born again Christians, but it does indicate they repudiated their atheist beliefs to some degree.

These are people who I ran across while researching for this lesson. They may not be the best examples, but I think they are instructive. What caused them to change their minds? What was the defining moment? As I read some of their stories, I got goose bumps.

#### 1. Francis Collins.

From Wikipedia:

“Francis Sellers Collins ForMemRS (born April 14, 1950) is an American physician-geneticist who discovered the genes associated with a number of diseases and led the Human Genome Project. He is the former director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland.”

“By graduate school, Collins considered himself an atheist. However, a conversation with a hospital patient led him to question his lack of religious views, and he investigated various faiths. He familiarized himself with the evidence for and against God in cosmology, and on the recommendation of a Methodist minister used *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis as a foundation to develop his religious views. He believes that people cannot be converted to Christianity by reason and argument alone, and that the final stage of conversion entails a "leap of faith". After several years of deliberation, he finally converted to Christianity during a trip to the Cascade Mountains, where he describes a striking image of a frozen waterfall as removing his final resistance, resulting in his

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conversion the following morning. He has described himself as a "serious Christian".”

#### 2. Rosaria Butterfield.

From <https://rosariabutterfield.com/biography/>

“Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, a former tenured professor of English and women’s studies at Syracuse University, converted to Christ in 1999 in what she describes as a train wreck. Her memoir *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert* chronicles that difficult journey. Rosaria is married to Kent, a Reformed Presbyterian pastor in North Carolina, and is a homeschool mother, author, and speaker.”

“Raised and educated in liberal Catholic settings, Rosaria fell in love with the world of words. In her late twenties, allured by feminist philosophy and LGBT advocacy, she adopted a lesbian identity. Rosaria earned her PhD from Ohio State University, then served in the English department and women's studies program at Syracuse University from 1992 to 2002. Her primary academic field was critical theory, specializing in queer theory. Her historical focus was 19th-century literature, informed by Freud, Marx, and Darwin. She advised the LGBT student group, wrote Syracuse University’s policy for same-sex couples, and actively lobbied for LGBT aims alongside her lesbian partner.”

“In 1997, while Rosaria was researching the Religious Right “and their politics of hatred against people like me,” she wrote an article against the Promise Keepers. A response to that article triggered a meeting with Ken Smith, who became a resource on the Religious Right and their Bible, a confidant, and a friend. In 1999, after repeatedly reading the Bible in large chunks for her research, Rosaria converted to Christianity. Her first book, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*, details her

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conversion and the cataclysmic fallout—in which she lost “everything but the dog,” yet gained eternal life in Christ.”

From believersportal.com, a quote from her:

“As a leftist lesbian professor, I despised Christians...The word Jesus stuck in my throat like an elephant tusk; no matter how hard I choked, I couldn’t hack it out. Those who professed that name commanded my pity and wrath.”

3. Kirsten Powers. From Wikipedia: “Kirsten Anne Powers (born December 14, 1967) is an American author, columnist, and political analyst. She currently writes for USA Today, and is an on-air political analyst at CNN, where she appears regularly on Anderson Cooper 360°, CNN Tonight with Don Lemon, and The Lead with Jake Tapper. The Washington Post called her "bright-eyed, sharp-tongued, [and] gamely combative". The New Republic noted Powers "held her own in any debate" at Fox News and quoted columnist Erik Wemple, who called her "a ferocious advocate for her points of view".”

From Wikipedia: “Powers was raised as an Episcopalian but spent much of her early adult life as an atheist. In her mid-30s, she became an evangelical Christian. The process of conversion began when she dated a Christian man, who introduced her to the Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City and the teachings of its pastor, Tim Keller, and culminated in an experience on a trip to Taiwan in 2006, where she later wrote she "woke up in what felt like a strange cross between a dream and reality. Jesus came to me and said, 'Here I am.'" She has called her conversion "a bit of a mind bender" due to her political beliefs and former atheism, and prefers the term "orthodox Christian" over "evangelical" to describe herself, given the cultural baggage around the



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latter term. She has said that the biggest impact her new-found faith had on her political beliefs was that she came to "view everyone as God's child, and that means everyone deserves grace and respect". On October 10, 2015, Powers was received into the Catholic Church."

Partly what pushed me into writing about the gospel and atheism was what Charlie Clough said about today's younger generation. Many know nothing about the Bible or Jesus Christ or "being saved." He mentioned that Paul was in similar situations in Acts chapters 14 and 17. So, let us look at what Paul did in Acts chapter 17 when he visited Athens, Greece.

**Acts 17:16 Now while Paul was waiting for them (Silas and Timothy) at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols.**

Paul was aware of Old Testament history during which Israel was exiled from the land because of their abandonment of God and their clinging to foreign idols. This grated on his "spirit." That would be his human spirit since it says "his" spirit and not the Spirit or the Holy Spirit.

**Acts 17:17 So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present.**

When Paul was reasoning, he had to contend with both the Jewish legalism that he abandoned as well as foreign idols which had been a constant snare to Israel in the Old Testament times. We have encountered this in our study of the book of Judges.

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**Acts 17:18 And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, “What would this idle babbler wish to say?” Others, “He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.**

From Thomas Constable concerning Epicureans:

“Epicureans were disciples of Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) who believed that pleasure was the greatest good and the most worthy pursuit of man. They meant pleasure in the sense of tranquility and freedom from pain, disquieting passions, and fears, especially the fear of death. Epicurus taught that the gods took no interest in human affairs. Thus organized religion was bad, and the gods would not punish evildoers in the afterlife. They were atheists. Epicurus' followers also believed that everything happened by chance, and that death was the end of one's existence. They were similar to "agnostic secularists." This philosophy is still popular today.”

Again from Thomas Constable on Stoics:

“"Stoics" followed the teachings of Zeno the Cypriot (340-265 B.C.). The name "Stoic" comes from "stoa," a particular portico (Gr. stoa) where he taught when he lived in Athens. His followers placed great importance on living in harmony with nature. They stressed individual self-sufficiency and rationalism, and they had a reputation for being quite arrogant. Stoics were pantheists, who believed that God is in everything, and everything is God. They were also fatalistic. Their teaching is also common today. A modern poet who set forth this philosophy of life, W. E. Henley, wrote, "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul," in his poem *Invictus*.

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Paul was facing a mixed audience. Some were atheists while others thought God was in everything.

Note that the word for “deities” comes from the word for demon. From the Greek perspective this was a general term for gods. It was not an insult from a Greek perspective.

**Acts 17:19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming?”**

The Areopagus is both a location and a group of people. Here is Thomas Constable:

“The exact location of the "Areopagus" (Gr., Areios Pagos; lit. "Court [or Council] of Ares," the Greek god of war) is difficult to determine. The Athenians used the term in two ways in Luke's day. It first of all referred to the Hill of Ares (i.e., Lat., Mars Hill), on which the Council of the Areopagus conducted its business in ancient times. Secondly it referred to the group of about 30 citizens, known as the Council of the Areopagus, who met in the Royal Portico of the Agora. The question is: Does "the Areopagus" refer to the people or the place? Luke's description is ambiguous, though I favor the people in view of the context.

**Acts 17:20 For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean.”**

**Acts 17:21 (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their**

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**time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)**

How did the apostle Paul deal with non-Jews, that is people who did not know about God from a biblical perspective. He had to find some kind of common ground, some kind of a starting point that his audience could agree to. I have chosen Paul's speech to Athenians at the Aeropagos in Acts chapter 17. He does not start with Jesus. He starts with their religious beliefs.

**Acts 17:22 So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects.**

**Religious.** This is from the word sometimes translated "demon." But the Greeks used the basic word as a general word for a god.

Here is a comment by Robbie Dean:

"This is very tongue-in-cheek. The Jews in the audience were really chuckling because he had just insulted nearly everybody there. He used the word *deisidaimon*. Part of that word, daimon, is where we get our word "demon." It is translated "religious" or "superstitious" or something of that nature, but there is a sort of double entendre there that indicates he is basically saying you are getting your ideas from the devil. Because other than the truth of the gospel all other ideas that make a competitive claim to truth against the Word of God ultimately comes from the devil—the devil's world is in competition with God's truth."

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**Acts 17:23** For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘**TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.**’ Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.

Note what Paul is doing. He takes something in their culture, something they can see and relate it to his gospel message. He needed common ground. So here it is. There is a god that you are ignorant of which I will now tell you about.

**Acts 17:24** The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands;

Today, even atheists who claim to “follow the science” would agree that the universe had a starting point. Science calls it the “Big Bang Theory.” Christians say God created the universe “ex nihilo,” out of nothing, creation. So atheists would agree what happened, the universe in a second of time came into being, but would deny the why—because God did it for His glory.

This creation is seen. This would lead us into a discussion of what is known as “general revelation.” God created the heavens and the earth. Some atheists become believers because of what they see of this creation.

**Acts 17:25** nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things;

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Interesting way of saying that you can't do anything for God. This is a way of saying it is "grace" in a way that people who have no idea what that means can understand it. This is a rebuttal of "abiogenesis" for those who are looking for truth.

**Acts 17:26 and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation,**

For some idolaters, they understood that there were different gods for different nations. But Paul is describing a God who is more powerful (omnipotent) than the "other gods."

**Acts 17:27 that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;**

Some people search for truth not realizing that the search is actually a search for THE God.

There was a Jesuit priest, Wilhelm Schmidt who studied primitive cultures and concluded that monotheism existed prior to polytheism in many cultures. Here is some background on him from Wikipedia:

"Wilhelm Schmidt (February 16, 1868 — February 10, 1954) was a German-Austrian Catholic priest, linguist and ethnologist. He presided over the Fourth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences that was held at Vienna in 1952."

"From 1912 to his death in 1954, Schmidt published his 12-volume *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* (The Origin of the Idea of God). There he explained his theory of primitive monotheism, the belief that primitive

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religion among almost all tribal peoples began with an essentially monotheistic concept of a high god — usually a sky god — who was a benevolent creator. Schmidt theorized that human beings believed in a God who was the First Cause of all things and Ruler of Heaven and Earth before men and women began to worship a number of gods:

“ Schmidt suggested that there had been a primitive monotheism before men and women had started to worship a number of gods. Originally they had acknowledge only one Supreme Deity, who had created the world and governed human affairs from afar.”

**Acts 17:28 for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’**

Once again, Paul connects with the Greek culture of the time relating it to his gospel message.

**Acts 17:29 Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.**

**Acts 17:30 Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent,**

**Acts 17:31 because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.”**

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Now that Paul gets to the punch, many in his audience were offended. Not everyone you give the gospel to is going to be positive. There are some that will be terribly offended, even hostile. But some eventually believe.

**Acts 17:32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, “We shall hear you again concerning this.”**

**Acts 17:33 So Paul went out of their midst.**

**Acts 17:34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.**

Giving the gospel is not about trying to convince someone they are wrong. That is the Holy Spirit's job. Your job is just giving clear concise correct information. It is also, not about numbers.