

Why
**THE BIBLE
SAYS SO**

— *Isn't Enough Anymore* —

ANDY STANLEY'S PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON MESSAGE
AND METHOD IN A POST-CHRISTIAN AMERICA





BY ANDY STANLEY
WITH THOMAS HORROCKS

First, the elephant in the room. I believe the Bible is without error in everything it affirms. I believe what the Bible says is true, is true. Neither of those statements is original. I learned the first one from [Dr. Norman L. Geisler](#) and the second one from the late Dr. Charles C. Ryrie. I was fortunate enough to study under both of these distinguished scholars. But long before I made the acquaintance of either, I was already convinced of the infallibility of the Scriptures. I was convinced for the same reason the late Dr. E.V. Hill was convinced. During our commencement address, he held up his big, black, well-worn, leather preaching Bible and declared loud and proud, “I believe the Bible is the inerrant, infallible, unchanging Word of God. And the reason I believe ... is my momma told me!”

My momma told me too.

So did my daddy.

In fact, while studying for my Th.M., my daddy, Dr. Charles F. Stanley, was embroiled in a battle for the soul of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). At stake was the Bible. He and a handful of other influential SBC conservatives worked tirelessly to rescue the convention from an academic stream that threatened to undermine the convention’s long-standing commitment to the infallibility of the Bible. In the end, they were successful. All that to say, the integrity of the Bible is neither a purely academic nor an emotionally neutral topic for me.

Big Guns

While Charles Ryrie will always be remembered for his groundbreaking study Bible, Norman Geisler will be remembered for his participation in the development of [The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy](#). The statement was produced in 1978 at an international summit of evangelical leaders. It was signed by nearly 300 scholars, including James Boice, John Gerstner, Carl F. H. Henry, Harold Lindsell, John Warwick Montgomery, J.I. Packer, Earl Radmacher, Francis Schaeffer, R.C. Sproul and, of course, Dr. Geisler. Following the conference, Dr. Geisler was asked to edit for publication the 14 papers presented at the conference. Topics included Christ's view of Scripture, alleged errors and discrepancies, the human authorship of inspired Scripture, philosophical presuppositions of biblical errancy and more. Two years later, the collection was published under the title [Inerrancy](#).

That was my textbook.

Dr. Geisler was my professor.

He called a couple of weeks ago to check on me. He's 84. I haven't talked to him in years. "Andy," he said, "folks are giving you a hard time. I understand what you were saying." He was referencing a message titled ["The Bible Told Me So"](#) that caused more than a few to question my view of Scripture and my understanding of how the canon came to be. The message was part of a six-part series titled [Who Needs God](#). The target audience was the increasing number of millennials who grew up in church but outgrew their faith.

More on that later.

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everybody does. You need to put something in print so *they* know you hold to inerrancy.” I assured him I would. But I also assured him the *they* he referred to wouldn’t change their opinion because I’ve been in this long enough to know my take on inerrancy is not really the issue. He laughed. “I know, but you need to put it in print anyway.”

So Here We Are

I love that man. In seminary we called him Stormin’ Norman. I remember walking out of class after his final Apologetics 101 lecture, staring up into a clear Texas sky and whispering a short prayer: “I’ve always believed ... but now I know.” He began the semester with the premise, “*Something exists.*” From there he built an argument for the existence of God, miracles, the historical reliability of the New Testament documents, the resurrection and finally the infallibility of the Old Testament based on Jesus’ statements regarding the Hebrew Scriptures. It was life changing. I’ve been drawing from that well for over 30 years. So when I read about and hear about my incoherent view of Scripture, my liberal leanings, how embarrassed my father must be, I smile and think, *You have no idea.* So for anyone out there who is still a bit suspicious, I affirm The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. Heck, I studied under the man who co-authored the whole thing.

Methodology and Theology

The confusion related to my most recent series stems more from methodology than theology. Two things in particular. First, I preach without notes. In my quest for an engaging presentation, I sometimes sacrifice precision. Sometimes I’m more precise at the 11:00 a.m. service than at the 9:00 a.m. By the time the 4:30 p.m. service rolls around, I usually have my act together. Usually. A second technique that is sometimes confusing for the occasional

viewer is my habit of saying what I suspect skeptics are thinking about something I'm saying. In my effort to state their assumptions, I sometimes sound as if I *share* their assumptions. Similarly, I look for opportunities to *affirm* an unbeliever's assumptions. I say things like, "I don't blame you a bit for thinking that way." For listeners accustomed to preachers taking every opportunity to correct, chastise and reprimand unbelievers, my approach is confusing. But for the father whose 23-year-old son agreed to give church one more chance ... well ... folks like that hug my neck and send me gift cards.

During "The Bible Told Me So," I wanted educated, de-churched millennials to know that I knew that those who supposedly know everything are convinced there was no worldwide flood or Hebrew migration from Egypt. While addressing them directly, I gave them the benefit of the doubt to make the following point: *Even if those events never occurred, it does nothing to undermine the evidence supporting the resurrection of Jesus and thus the claims he made about himself.* And yes, as noted above, I know Jesus made claims about the Jewish Scriptures. But this was one sermon in a series of six ... I hadn't gotten to that yet.

As I explain in *Deep and Wide* and *Communicating for a Change*, I approach a message series like a single, two- or three-hour message divided into four or five parts. I'm comfortable with tension, unanswered questions and leaving people hanging. Not everybody is.

But to recap, yes, I believe the Bible is without error in everything it affirms. Yes, my approach to preaching is not traditional. Yes, my approach at times leaves those outside our local congregations wondering if I'm still an evangelical. So in light of all that, along with the fact that here I am once again having to explain myself, shouldn't I consider changing my approach?

No.

Actually, I would like you to consider changing yours.

Here's why.

The world has changed.

The approach most of us inherited doesn't work anymore. Actually, it's never worked all that well. In a culture that had high regard for the Bible, the traditional approach held its own. Those days are over. They've been over for a long time. If you think I'm using culture as an excuse to maintain a flawed hermeneutical approach, consider this.

In 2015, I took seven staff members to Nashville to attend the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission conference on "Homosexuality and the Future of Marriage." In the opening session, Dr. Al Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, made a comment that took my breath away. Nobody else in the room seemed the least bit bothered. I wrote it down and then went back and listened to the session again online to make sure I heard correctly. Speaking specifically about Southern Baptist churches, he stated:

"The vast majority of people who've ever been baptized by our people are our own offspring. We've never been very evangelistic in terms of people who weren't those to whom we gave birth."

Seriously? The SBC has never been evangelistic beyond people to whom they gave birth? If that's the case, and he should know, it seems to me my friends in the SBC, along with church networks everywhere that embrace a similar approach, need to

hit pause and rethink things. Perhaps everything. Not their view of Scripture. But perhaps their approach to talking about Scripture. More specifically, their approach to talking about Scripture in a culture that doesn't take the Bible seriously anymore.

Eight years ago I shifted my approach. I didn't announce it. I just did it. The results have been remarkable. You may not like my

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approach. That's fine. I just hope you don't stick with an approach you inherited because it's comfortable. As I tell leaders all the time, "Marry your mission; date your model." Your preaching and teaching model is just that—a model.

It may be time to break up.

It's Worse Than We Thought

It's no secret the religious landscape in America has shifted. Fewer and fewer Americans are self-identifying as Christians, while more and more are identifying as religiously unaffiliated. As you've heard by now, this group has been nicknamed the "nones" because they checked "none of the above" on religious affiliation surveys. According to Pew Research Center's 2014 Religious Landscape Study, nearly one quarter of Americans claim no religious affiliation, representing a 7-point jump in just seven years. Young Americans are more likely to be religiously unaffiliated than older Americans with millennials comprising 44 percent of the nones. Millennial nones are walking away from the faith they grew up with, the faith of their parents, in record numbers.¹ Surveys, podcasts and blogs leave one with the distinct impression that the version of faith this generation grew up with left them unprepared for the rigors and questions of academia and adulthood. This is especially true for those who pursue education beyond high school. The dechurched who grew up in church exit because they find the version of Christianity they've grown up with unconvincing, uninspiring and irrelevant.

It's important to recognize that millennials don't perceive their understanding of Christianity as a version of anything. For them, their version is the only version. The version of Christianity they were raised on is Christianity. More and more find their version of faith ill-suited for the undeniable realities, both scientific and sociological, of the world in which they find themselves. If we're going to reach the unchurched, underchurched, dechurched, and postchurched with the gospel in a culture that's trending

post-Christian, we must rethink our *approach*. Changing times call for changing approaches in order to accomplish our unchanging mission of making disciples.

But first another word or two about those looking for the back door.

Post-Christian

According to the 2014 Religious Landscape Study referenced earlier, nones represent nearly 23 percent of Americans. Think about that ... 23 percent. That's just under 56 million people. Chances are, you are related to a none or two. You certainly know a few. You've baptized some. You probably drove a few to camp. You gave some current nones their first Bibles. You know their parents—their heartbroken, disappointed, frightened parents.

We've been told for decades that we live in a postmodern culture. While we struggle to define the term itself, few of us would disagree with the assessment. And if we're honest, even fewer of us have adjusted our ministry approaches to compensate for this reality. But here's something we can all get our heads around. We are now a post-Christian culture. One distinctive feature of postmodernism is its rejection of uniformitarianism, the insistence that there is only one right way of thinking and behaving.² Post-Christian takes that to a frightening new level. Former *National Review* editor John O'Sullivan provides the following helpful definition of post-Christianity:

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*A post-Christian society is not merely a society in which agnosticism or atheism is the prevailing fundamental belief. It is a society rooted in the history, culture, and practices of Christianity but in which the religious beliefs of Christianity have been either rejected or, worse, forgotten.*³

There is an important distinction between a non-Christian and a post-Christian. The reason our evangelistic endeavors result in more recycling than actual conversion is that our methods and approaches assume non-Christian rather than post-Christian.

That must change.

In a non-Christian society, people may have never heard anything about Christianity and, therefore, have few to no pre-conceived notions. A post-Christian society is the opposite. In a post-Christian society, people have been exposed to Christianity (in our case, for generations) but are opting out for a different worldview, a different narrative through which to make sense of the world. In a post-Christian society, people know the stories; they just don't believe 'em. Or in many cases, they don't believe 'em anymore.

The Barna group has developed a metric for identifying a post-Christian. This metric is based on stated beliefs and practices, such as belief or disbelief in God, church attendance, spiritual practices, etc. As it turns out, more and more Americans who identify as Christians qualify as post-Christians based on their actual behaviors. According to the Barna Group, 48 percent of Americans qualify as “post-Christian”⁴ ... 48 percent! Bottom line: Many, perhaps most of the nones in America have had some connection to Christianity in their pasts but have rejected it. They are not non-Christians in the way we are accustomed to thinking about non-Christians. They are post-Christian. That's a whole nother thing. This group has been there, done that, and has a closetful of camp T-shirts to show for it. This presents a unique challenge for us in terms of apologetics and evangelism. It requires a new approach.

The approach I'll unpack in the remainder of this article is nei-

ther new nor original. As I will attempt to demonstrate, it's modeled on the preaching of the earliest Christian evangelists—the ones who turned the world upside down and who against all odds fueled a movement that captured the attention and, ultimately, the participation of the pagan world both inside and outside the Roman Empire.

Maybe we should do that again.

The Bible Tells Me So

For post-Christians, common sense, science, philosophy and reason are the go-tos for worldviews and decision-making. Post-Christian nones have a low tolerance for faith-based answers to fact-based questions. At the same time, like most of us, they aren't exactly on a truth quest either. They're on a happiness quest. Many walked away from faith because faith didn't

make them happy. That's never a presenting reason. Nobody wants to appear that shallow. But scratch beneath the surface and you'll find the quest for happiness plays a big role. When faith is viewed as an impediment to happiness, goodbye faith. The seemingly irrational, anti-science version of faith many were brought up on makes it that much easier to simply walk away. Given all of that, this next statistic should not come as any surprise. When asked about their views of Scripture, 72 percent of nones said that it is not the Word of God. This data is corroborated by data compiled in a massive study conducted by the Barna Group.

From 2011 to 2016, the Barna Group, in collaboration with the American Bible Society, collected, tracked and analyzed Americans' perceptions of and engagement with the Bible. They released their findings in the book *The Bible in America: The*

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*Changing Landscape of Bible Perceptions and Engagement.*⁵ In the introduction, David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, outlines the most significant trends from the six-year study. First and foremost, “increased skepticism.” The following quote is a bit long, but it’s extraordinarily important. In fact, if you want to stir up your next staff or elders meeting, just pass out copies of the following:

*More people have more questions about the origins, relevance and authority of the Scriptures ... the steady rise of skepticism is creating a cultural atmosphere that is becoming unfriendly—sometimes even hostile—to claims of faith. In a society that venerates science and rationalism, it is an increasingly hard pill to swallow that an eclectic assortment of ancient stories, poems, sermons, prophecies and letters, written and compiled over the course of 3,000 years, is somehow the sacred “Word of God.” Even in just the few years Barna has been conducting “State of the Bible” interviews, the data is trending toward Bible skepticism. With each passing year, the percentage of Americans who believe that the Bible is “just another book written by men” increases. So too does the perception that the Bible is actually harmful and that people who live by its principles are religious extremists.*⁶

In 2011, 10 percent of Americans qualified as skeptics when it came to the Bible. In 2016, just six years later, that number had more than doubled. Doubled! Currently, 22 percent of Americans do not believe the Bible has any divine underpinnings.⁷ But the current percentage is not the real story. The real story is the current rate at which culture is dismissing the Bible as uninspired, untrue and irrelevant.

But it doesn’t stop there.

Twenty-seven percent of millennial non-Christians believe “the Bible is a dangerous book of religious dogma used for centuries to oppress people.”⁸ Journalists, scientists and scholars—the likes of Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens—have provided plenty of one-sided commentary to support that narrative. Download and read Sam Harris’ *Letter to a Chris-*

tian Nation and ask yourself how well a 20-something-year-old, Sunday-school educated, college student's faith would stand up under that kind of barrage.

So What's A Girl To Do?

As bleak as all that sounds, I'm not discouraged. For one reason, as we all know, the original version of our faith was extraordinarily robust. Once upon a time our faith was stronger than Roman steel and tougher than Roman nails. Against all odds a small band of Jesus followers defied an empire and claimed their leader came to replace the temple. Two-thousand years later, we're still standing. All over the world. And we have the internet! So I'm not worried. But I'm not sitting around praying for revival either. I grew up in the "pray for revival" culture. It's a cover for a church's unwillingness to make changes conducive to real revival. You want revival? Start assuming there are post-Christian people in the room. All the rooms. Begin evaluating through the eyes and ears of post-Christians.

Don't know any?

That may be part of the problem.

Appealing to post-Christian people on the basis of the authority of Scripture has essentially the same effect as a Muslim imam appealing to you on the basis of the authority of the Quran. You may or may not already know what it says. But it doesn't matter. The Quran doesn't carry any weight with you. You don't view the Quran as authoritative.

Close to half our population does not view the Bible as authoritative either. If you're trying to reach people with an undergraduate degree or greater, over half your target audience will not be moved by "the Bible says," "the Bible teaches," "God's Word is clear" or anything along those lines. If that's the approach to preaching and teaching you grew up with and are most comfortable with, you're no doubt having a good ol' throw-down debate with me in your head about now—a debate I'm sure you're win-

ning. But before you chapter and verse me against the wall and put me in a sovereignty-of-God headlock, would you stop and ask yourself: *Why does this bother me so much? Why does this bother me so much—really?*

OK, commence with the debate.

But finish the article.

Breaking Up

Years ago our organization made several decisions to better position us to minister to and recapture the attention of post-Christian people. We adjusted our sails. We cast our nets on the other side. We ... you get the picture. And why wouldn't we? The data Barna and others have collected should cause all of us to stop and rethink what we're doing. Al Mohler's statement should cause our hearts to skip a beat. As I mentioned earlier, it was about eight years ago that I adjusted my preaching to compensate for an increasingly post-Christian audience. I adapted my approach. An adaptation that, as we've seen, left some of my conservative Christian brothers and sisters wondering about my orthodoxy. I get that. I just wish they would ask more questions and make fewer accusations. I'm easy to find.

As part of my shift, I stopped leveraging the *authority* of Scripture and began leveraging the authority and stories of the people behind the Scripture. To be clear, I don't believe "the Bible says," "Scripture teaches," and "the Word of God commands" are incorrect approaches. But they are ineffective approaches for post-Christian people. I don't regret teaching my children that the Bible is God's Word. But my grown-up kids understand their confidence in the Bible is rooted in their confidence in who Jesus is based on the testimonies of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, James and the apostle Paul.

Shifting the conversation away from the authority of Scripture to the authority, courage and faithfulness of the men and women behind our Scriptures has not only enabled me to better connect

with post-Christians, it's done wonders for the faith of the faithful. The stories of the men and women behind the Scriptures are rich, inspiring and, unfortunately, not as well-known as you might think. For my latest example, go to WhoNeedsGod.com and watch the last 10 minutes of part six. To wrap the series, I leveraged the story of James to encourage nones to reconsider the claims of Christ, just as James the Just had to do after the resurrection of his brother. As you'll see, this in no way undermines the authority of the Bible. It actually underscores the historical roots of our Bible. You'd be shocked by how many students and adults in your church view the Bible as a *spiritual* book that says true things to live by as opposed to an inspired collection of documents documenting *events* that actually *happened*. This is why I will continue to insist that the foundation of *our faith is not an inspired book but the events that inspired the book*; events that inspired writers, borne along by the Holy Spirit, to document conversations, insights and events—the pivotal event being the resurrection. While it's true we would not know these events occurred had they not been documented, two other things are equally true. First, they were documented years before there was a Bible (i.e., New Testament bound together with the Jewish Scriptures). Second, it is the events, not the record of the events, that birthed the “church.” The Bible did not create Christianity. Christianity is the reason the Bible was created. The reason many Christians struggle with statements like these is they grew up on “The Bible says” preaching. And that's fine as long as one *first* believes the Bible is inspired.

Notice I said *first*.

Let me state it another way.

If someone is *first* convinced the Bible is God's Word, you can leverage “The Bible says” language. But let's be honest. What do you call people who *first* accept the Bible as God's Word *before* they've read the Bible? What do you call someone who takes someone's word for something as significant as “This book is the infallible Word of God?” What kind of

person would go for that?

A child.

When did you come to believe the Bible is God's Word? Be honest. Chances are you arrived at that conclusion the same way I did. Your momma told you. Or your pastor told you. You accepted the authority of the Bible long before you read it. In my case, before I was able to read it! Only a child would accept the Bible as God's infallible Word before knowing what was inside the Bible.

Anything wrong with that?

I hope not. I did the same thing for (Richard Dawkins would say *to*) my children. And I'm glad I did. But this explains in part why we have a difficult time doing effective evangelism outside the circle of the already indoctrinated and the already convinced. Very few people reading this article embraced the Bible as God's Word as adults. The few who did were probably predisposed to hold the Bible in high regard as a result of some experience in childhood. My point? If we're going to reach post-Christians, we must change the way we *talk* about the Bible. Remember, we don't live in a non-Christian culture. We live in a post-Christian culture. Most educated people have an educated opinion about what the Bible is and isn't. They don't walk into your church with blank slates. They walk in with full slates. Consequently, we must begin the conversation on the lowest rung of the ladder. That's not hard to do. And no, it doesn't require that we water things down and ignore mature believers in the room. People who think it's either/or just haven't seen it done well.

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Precedence

While there are no New Testament examples of sermons designed with post-Christians in mind for obvious reasons, Luke documents four occasions where two prominent leaders in the first-century church adjusted their approaches in light of their audiences. Specifically, they adjusted their use of and reference to their Scriptures, our Old Testament, based on the assumptions of their listeners. While they tailored and adapted their *approaches*, their *central message* remained the same.

That's all I'm asking you to consider.

Exhibit A: Peter and the Jews

In the second chapter of Acts, Luke documents what is thought to be the first Christian sermon delivered after the resurrection. The setting is the city of Jerusalem during the Jewish festival of Pentecost. The preacher is Peter. The audience, Luke tells us, was a crowd of “God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5). But they weren’t there to hear a sermon. They had come together to figure out how this strange band of Galileans had mastered such a wide variety of dialects. The Jewish makeup of the audience is corroborated by Peter’s opening statement, “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem” (Acts 2:14). Peter begins by explaining that the phenomenon they just experienced was not the result of a few too many mimosas. “No,” he says, “this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel.” He goes on to quote several lines from the book of Joel (2:28–32) to confirm that the event they just witnessed was predicted in their Scriptures (Acts 2:15–21). Then he directs their attention to the recent events concerning Jesus of Nazareth, events with which many in his audience would have been quite familiar. Following that, he states his thesis, his big idea.

“... and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead” (v. 23–24a).

Peter again turns to the Jewish Scriptures (Psalm 16:8–11), this time to demonstrate that the resurrection was the fulfillment of Scripture (vs. 25–31). Then he gets personal: *“God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it”* (v. 32). After another quick appeal to Psalm 110:1, Peter delivers the homiletical coup de grâce, the final point, the big “so what” of his message: *“Therefore, let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah”* (vs. 32–36).

Throughout the message, Peter leverages his version of “the Bible says,” “the Scripture teaches.” This makes perfect sense given Peter’s audience. This was a group that held their Scriptures in high regard. If their Bible said it, that settled it. It didn’t hurt that most of Peter’s audience believed those particular Scriptures pointed to a future Messiah. Peter simply connected the dots. He connected their existing belief, which was informed by the Jewish Scriptures, to a current event.

Exhibit B: Peter and the Gentiles

Eight chapters later, Luke records a second message delivered by Peter, this time to a Gentile audience in Caesarea. Peter had been invited to the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. We can’t begin to comprehend how difficult it was for Peter to step across the threshold of a Gentile home. In the awkward opening lines of his message, he freely admits this was his first time to do so. And this was approximately 10 years after the resurrection!

Best we can tell, this was the first evangelistic presentation made to an exclusively Gentile audience, in this case Cornelius’ close friends and relatives (Acts 10:24). After an introduction that must have offended every Gentile in the room, Peter dives into his message. Here it is.

“You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, an-

nouncing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

“We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Peter doesn't leverage “the Bible says” this time around. He doesn't quote from the Jewish Scriptures. Whereas it made up about 25 percent of his message to the Jews, not so here, which is understandable.

While Gentiles respected the Jewish Scriptures for their antiquity, they didn't consider them authoritative. On the contrary, as Peter readily admits in his regretful introduction, Jews and Gentiles had as little to do with each other as possible. The Jewish Scriptures were given to the Jews. So Peter focuses almost exclusively on the well-known and thus verifiable events surrounding the life, death and, ultimately, the resurrection of Jesus. Peter is clear; Jesus was more than

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a Jewish Messiah. The resurrection had implications beyond the nation of Israel. Jesus, Peter declared, was appointed by God to judge all the living and all the dead, both Jews and Gentiles.

Once his case was made, evidence presented, he adds:

“All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

When you read this closing statement in context, clearly Peter isn't using this nonspecific reference to the prophets as a selling point. It reads as almost an afterthought. And he doesn't bother to reference or quote a specific prophet. Assuming Cornelius and his family were not familiar with the Jewish prophets, it wouldn't have made much difference anyway. Some argue this vague reference to prophets was actually for the benefit of the Jews who accompanied him to Cornelius' home. This view certainly makes sense based on what happened next. No sooner had Peter gotten that last line out when:

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.

Notice who was most impressed:

The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. (Acts 10:44–46)

This was, in fact, what the prophet Joel predicted. The Jews in the room put two and two together. There was no denying it. The Gentiles were in!

While Peter's messages differ in their use of the Jewish Scriptures, both have as their central theme the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. That's what mattered most. That's still what matters most. This is why I'm absolutely convinced of the following: In the marketplace—not the church—in the public square, in the classroom, we must shift the debate away from whether the entire Bible is true and focus the debate on whether Jesus rose from the dead. That is *the* issue. And that is an event for which we have over-

whelming evidence. And no, our evidence does not come from the Bible. Evidence for the resurrection comes from the eyewitness testimonies of Jesus' first-century followers who documented not what they believed but what they saw. Later, these documents were collected and included in what would later be titled the Bible. If that sounds like a distinction without a difference, you are mistaken.

Exhibit C: Paul and the Jews

The apostle Paul makes the clearest argument for adjusting one's approach based on one's audience. Read these familiar verses with that in mind.

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:19–23)

Paul's mission? "Win" 'em and "save" 'em.

His approach? Whatever it took to "win" 'em and "save" 'em.

Paul was not married to a method. He was completely sold out to a mission. Let this phrase rattle around in your mind for a few minutes:

"... so that by all possible means I might save some."

Which means, Paul?

"All possible means."

So, you may take one approach one day and a different approach a different day? Am I reading you right?

"All possible means."

Is that really necessary? Doesn't the Spirit do the work?

“All possible means.”

But isn't it enough to preach the Word and let the seed fall where it may?

“All possible means.”

And why do you go to such lengths?

“... for the sake of the gospel.”

What if we just did that for a year? What if we opted for the “all possible means” approach? What if we decided to do whatever it takes?

That's when the world changes.

Again.

If there was ever a first-century preacher who had the goods to leverage “the Bible says” and “the Scripture teaches,” it was Paul. As a Pharisee, he was trained in the Law. He studied under Gamaliel. We know from his letters that his intellect and reasoning abilities were second to none. His message recorded by Luke in Acts 13 is mind-blowing. Standing in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch, surrounded by Jews, Paul begins his message with Israel's migration from Egypt. From there he walks his audience through their own history right up to the era of King Saul and King David. But when he gets to David, he pivots:

“From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised.” (Acts 13:23)

From there Paul dives right into the details of Jesus' arrest, crucifixion, burial and, of course, the main event:

“But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.” (Acts 13:30–31)

Then he connects the dots:

““

WHAT IF WE DID
THAT FOR A YEAR?
WHAT IF WE OPTED
FOR THE ‘ALL
POSSIBLE’ MEANS
APPROACH? WHAT
IF WE DECIDE TO
DO WHATEVER IT
TAKES?

””

“We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus.” (Acts 13:32)

But he’s not finished. Diving back into the Jewish Scriptures, Paul quotes from the second psalm. He makes application to Jesus and then wraps it all up with a warning from the prophet Habakkuk.

No notes.

No net.

It’s dizzying.

But his point is unmistakably clear and no doubt offensive to some in the room.

“Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.” (vs. 38–39)

Translated: Jesus did what Moses couldn’t.

Paul’s message to his Jewish audience is similar to Peter’s in Acts 2. Paul, like Peter, knew when it was appropriate to leverage “the Scripture teaches” and when to leverage something else.

Case in point.

Exhibit D: Paul and the Gentiles

While Paul’s pedigree made him a formidable opponent for Jews intent on discrediting the Jesus movement, Jews were not his primary audience. Paul was called to take the gospel to Gentiles. The majority of Acts is dedicated to Paul’s missionary endeavors throughout the Mediterranean basin. During one of these trips, Paul took the opportunity to preach to a gathering of educated upper-class Greeks. Fortunately for us, his traveling companion Luke documented what took place.

In Acts 17, we find Paul waiting in Athens for the arrival of Timothy and Silas. While wandering through town, he couldn’t help but notice the place was full of idols. This eventually led to a heated debate with a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who were confounded by Paul’s insistence that ... ready for this ... someone

had risen from the dead (Acts 17:18). As a result they brought Paul to the Areopagus and gave him an opportunity to make his case, which, of course, he was more than happy to do. But his message in Athens is nothing like his message in Antioch. He doesn't start with the story of the Jewish exodus. He begins by complimenting his audience on their interest in the gods.

"People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious."
(Acts 17:22b)

Not only does he choose not to mention the Jewish exodus, he chooses not to quote from the book of Exodus. Specifically:

"You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below."
(Exodus 20:4)

How did he resist?

If his goal had been to be right or to make a point, he wouldn't have resisted. He would have just preached the Word. But Paul wasn't there to be right or merely make a point. His goal was to "win" some and "save" some. So he chose not to quote from the Scriptures. He quoted one of their poets instead. Rather than assuring them their gods didn't exist, he chose to talk about the God they missed. He referenced an altar dedicated to an unknown god. This was the ancient Athenian way of playing it safe. You know, just in case they missed one. Did your mom ever set an extra place at the dinner table in case someone dropped by? Same idea.

“

SO WILL YOU
CONSIDER RETOOLING
IN ORDER TO WIN SOME
AND SAVE SOME? ARE
YOU WILLING TO TAKE
A LONG, HARD LOOK
AT EVERYTHING YOU'RE
CURRENTLY DOING
THROUGH THE EYES OF
THE POST-CHRISTIAN?

”

At this point in his message, Paul employs an unusual preaching technique. I've been using it for years. Just about every time

I do, I'm criticized by Christians outside our churches. But I learned it from Paul. My latest attempt is in part one of the series I referenced earlier, *Who Needs God?*

So what is this unorthodox approach Paul models for us?

Paul summarizes the Genesis account of creation, including a reference to Adam, without referencing Genesis or Adam. He teaches Scripture without referencing Scripture. How unusual. Why not do what he did in Antioch? Why not give 'em chapter and verse? Why so seeker sensitive all of a sudden? We can only guess. Odds are if Paul had referenced his source, his audience may have turned him off. When your mission in life is to win some and save some, you never give up influence unnecessarily. When your mission in life is to be right, maintaining influence isn't important. I bet you know parents who wish they could go back and parent with the goal of maintaining influence rather than simply being right. You can *right* kids *right out the door*. You can right kids right out the door of the church as well.

Paul does two more unusual things in this message. He tells the Athenians they need to repent of their idolatry. But that's it. He doesn't reference all the other things they needed to repent of. And the list was long. But the most unusual facet of his message to this elite group in Athens is that he never mentions Jesus.

Don't move by that too quickly. And don't resort to, "Well, Luke may have left that part out." That's ridiculous. If you hold to the doctrine of inerrancy, that's the equivalent of blaming the Holy Spirit for leaving it out.

Anyway.

Paul references Jesus in his message. He just doesn't bother to identify him.

"For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead." (Acts 17:31)

According to Luke, that's how the message concluded.

He left his audience hanging.

You should try that.

Was it effective?

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject."

What do you know! A two-part series.

At that, Paul left the Council. Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. (Acts 17:33–34)

To say Paul's approach to the Gentiles in Athens differed from his approach to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch would be the understatement of understatements. But his central message was the same. God has done something in the world on behalf of all humankind. He has punctuated and authenticated this great work by raising someone from the dead! "Come back for part 2 and I'll tell you his name."

Wrapping Up

While my approach to preaching is not traditional, hopefully I've convinced you it's not original either. Now you know why I'm not willing to give it up. Now you understand why I want you to join me. We may be miles apart on the particulars of our theology, but that's not an obstacle for me. Besides, if we don't unite around what we have in common, the day will come when it no longer matters where we differ. The approach to preaching most of us saw modeled and, consequently, unwittingly inherited is perfectly designed for a culture that no longer exists. Fortunately, first-century church leaders have modeled the way forward. The real question is, are we willing to follow their lead? Are we ready to acknowledge the new normal and adjust? If we genuinely care about the unchurched and the post-churched, we will. If we genuinely care, we will adopt the apostle Paul's mantra: So that by all possible means I might save some.

“

WHAT IS THE
FAITH OF YOUR
CHILDREN
WORTH? YOUR
GRANDCHILDREN?
THINK ABOUT
IT. WHAT IS THE
FAITH OF THE
NEXT GENERATION
WORTH? I SAY
EVERYTHING.

”

Here's a question I ask church leaders every time I get the opportunity.

What is the faith of the next generation worth?

What is the faith of your children worth? Your grandchildren? Think about it. What is the faith of the next generation worth? I say *everything*. I say it's worth any change necessary to ensure the version of faith the next generation leaves home with is the enduring version—the faith of our first-century fathers. The version that was harder than steel and tougher than nails. The version rooted in an *event*, not a *book*.

So will you consider retooling in order to win some and save some? Are you willing to take a long, hard look at everything you're currently doing through the eyes of the post-Christian? Are you ready to be a student rather than a critic? We don't have time for tribes. We don't have time for the petty disagreements that only those inside our social media circles understand or care about. We're losing ground. The most counterproductive thing we can do is criticize and refuse to learn from one another. So come on. If you believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, that's all I need to know. And in light of what's at stake, in light of who is at stake, perhaps that's all you need to know as well.

*Andy Stanley is the senior pastor of North Point Ministries in Georgia (a [2016 Outreach 100 church](#), No. 37 fastest growing and No. 1 largest) and the author of several books, including *Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Like to Attend* and "Visioneering: God's Blueprint for Developing and Maintaining Mission." Read more from Andy Stanley at [OutreachMagazine.com/Andy-Stanley](#).*

Thomas Horrocks is the pastor of Stoneybrook Community Church of God in Bloomington, Indiana, and a commissioned minister of the Church of God, Anderson, Indiana.

Footnotes

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