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What Is Evangelism?

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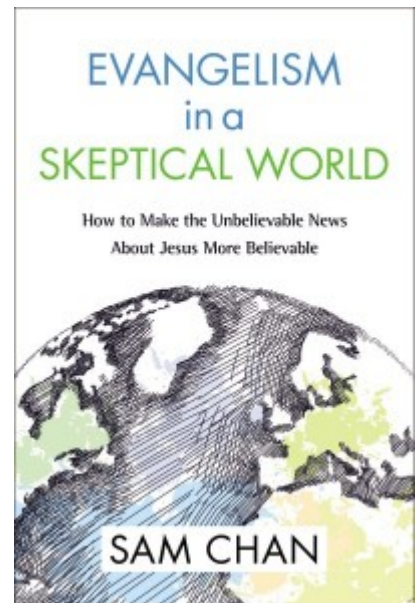
Most Christians know that they should be engaging in the work of evangelism, but few know what evangelism is.

For example, is the stay-at-home mom who helps run the play group at her church doing evangelism if she incorporates Bible stories into the craft activities? Can a play group become an evangelistic play group?

Or does evangelism only occur in more "conventional" tactics: witnessing on the street, leading large crusades? Are those the only ways the gospel of Jesus Christ can be communicated, the only way people can evangelize?

In other words: **What counts as evangelism? What is evangelism?**

This word evangelism carries a lot of baggage, tradition, and emotion. Furthermore, most people have been poorly equipped with evangelism methods that are no longer effective in today's post-Christian world. As a result, many people become frustrated with their evangelistic efforts, blame themselves when their evangelism efforts don't seem to work, and simply give up communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ.



The definition of evangelism

Many people use the word evangelism in different ways. However, what does the Bible say about this important word? When we look to Scripture, we run into a problem: there is no direct-equivalent word for our English word evangelism in the New Testament. Its origin is rooted in three Greek words:

- *euangelion*—“gospel”—to describe what is said (Mark 1:14–15)
- *euangelistes*—“evangelist”—to describe the person who is telling the gospel (Acts 21:8; Eph. 4:11)
- *euangelizo*—“to proclaim the gospel”—to describe the activity of telling the gospel (Rom. 10:15).

Evangelism, then, is the English term for the act of communicating the gospel, an act conveyed in the New Testament by the verb *euangelizo* (‘to bring good news’) (14).

“The best way to understand the term evangelism,” Chan explains, “is that it is our attempt to describe what happens when someone tells the *euangelion* or gospel, which is the ‘good news’ about Jesus Christ.” (14) Chan goes on to give a fuller answer to “What is evangelism”:

The essence of evangelism is the message that Jesus Christ is Lord. Evangelism is our human effort of proclaiming this message—which necessarily involves using our human communication, language, idioms, metaphors, stories, experiences, personality, emotions, context, culture, locatedness—and trusting and praying that God, in his sovereign will, will supernaturally use our human and natural means to effect his divine purposes.

In a general sense, evangelism refers to our human efforts of proclaiming this message to any audience of believers and nonbelievers. In a narrower sense, evangelism refers to our human efforts of proclaiming this message to nonbelievers. But in both

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Sometimes we need to rethink and re-define what it means to evangelize. **The essence of evangelism is the gospel**, which is the good news of Jesus—not methods or the kinds and sizes of audiences. Which means we are free to make this **unbelievable* good news** about Jesus more believable in any number of ways: through urging or encouraging; blessing or warning; and even activities for children such as singing, puppet shows, and drama.

(***Note: Why does *Evangelism in a Skeptical World* refer at times to the gospel as "unbelievable"?** Chan writes, "Many people today cannot believe in the gospel because of 'defeater beliefs.'" If someone holds a defeater belief, they cannot imagine calling themselves a Christian—"Not if the Christian God sends people to hell! Not if the Christian God oppresses women. And certainly not if the Christian God won't allow gays to get married." Chan explains, "Until these [defeater beliefs] are addressed by Christians, people [who hold these beliefs] will refuse to believe the gospel of Jesus. But if Christians can hear, understand, empathize with, and address [these] presuppositions, then the unbelievable news of Jesus might become more believable." Chan's book *Evangelism in a Skeptical World* will help you achieve these goals.)

Bible verses about evangelism and its roles

The Bible has some important things to say about various roles in evangelism. These roles help us better understand it. Just as in an orchestra, where there are different parts to play—from violinists to trumpeters, flutists to percussionists—in the same way, there are different roles in evangelism.

1 Thessalonians 1:4–10 reveals six crucial parts that persons play in the symphony of evangelism, which Chan outlines below:

1. **God's role is to choose people for salvation (v.4).** God has a sovereign role in salvation. This is the theological idea of calling, election, and predestination.
2. **Jesus' role is to save people from wrath (v. 10).** He is responsible for dying for people and their sins, rising from the dead, and one day coming back to judge people. Jesus' other role is that the gospel story is about him (v. 8). The gospel is a message about who Jesus is and what he's done to save people from their sins.
3. **Paul's role is to communicate the gospel (v. 5).** He did this both with words and actions, not just what he said but also how he lived. Paul gives more details about his

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gospel, convicting them (v. 5), and opening their hearts to receive the gospel with joy (v. 6).

5. **The Thessalonians hear the gospel and welcome it with joy (v. 6b).** They respond with faith (v. 8b) by turning from their idols to God (vv. 8b–9). Now they imitate Paul (v. 6a) and are models for other believers (v. 7) while they wait for Jesus to return (v. 10).
6. **The gospel is a message about Jesus (v. 8).** It is the means by which the Holy Spirit convicts people of their sins (v. 5) and enables them to welcome God's salvation with joy (v. 6). (20–21)

This chart further describes these evangelism roles by mapping them along six theological categories:

God	Chooses (v. 5)	Election
Jesus	Saves (v. 10)	Atonement
Paul (the evangelist)	Brings the gospel (v. 5)	External call
Holy Spirit	Power, suffering, joy (vv. 5–6)	Internal call
Thessalonians (hearers)	Faith and repentance (vv. 8–9)	Conversion
Gospel message	Story of Jesus (v. 8)	Instrument

Like Paul's role in 1 Thessalonians, "Our role is to communicate the gospel both in words and actions. But our role is not God's: we are not sovereignly choosing who gets saved. Our role is not Jesus': we are not saving people from their sins. Our role is not the Holy Spirit's: we cannot force people to believe. Instead we must stay focused on our role as the evangelist and do it well." (21)

Common approaches to evangelism

Over the years, several approaches to evangelism have been developed to communicate the gospel and lead people to salvation—including some less-than-savory approaches, like [pressure evangelism](#). Chan presents several of the best approaches to evangelism, including these common ones.

(1) Everyday evangelism—One of the most common approaches to evangelism integrates evangelism into our daily lives. "Our usual approach to evangelism is to add some activity to our lives: maybe I'm going to try to tell someone about Jesus at lunch or I'm going to join a book club... But we need to change our lives so that we live an evangelistic lifestyle, not a life with add-on bits of evangelism." (45)

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looking for opportunities to tell Jesus' story of good news.

(2) *Evangelism expository talk*—A more formal approach to communicating the gospel uses an expository Bible message. Examples include an evangelistic Sunday church service or youth group events, after-dinner talks at a restaurant or coffee shop, and men's breakfasts or dinners. Chan describes this approach in this way:

We begin with a Bible passage. Sometimes you are given a text, and sometimes you get to choose. Your choice should be guided, in part, by your audience. What concepts of sin, salvation, Jesus, and conversion will best suit the audience, setting, and occasion? What learning style will the audience prefer—didactic or narrative?

The next step is to convert the big idea into a question with an answer... After you have your question, the next step is to convert it into an existential question. The existential question is the need addressed by this passage. You may need to reflect on the passage and the question you've developed to work out what existential need is addressed by the big idea. (218, 220)

(3) *Apologetics*—Another common approach to communicating the good news of Jesus Christ is through the use of facts and evidence, arguments and logic—also known as apologetics, an approach that seeks to get people to change their views. “So how can we get people to change their views?” Chan asks. “Do people believe what they believe because of evidence? Or because of presuppositions? This is the chicken-and-egg argument that divides the Christian world in the field of apologetics,” which includes two dominant approaches: evidentialism and presuppositionalism.” (252)

- *Evidentialism* believes that if we give people evidence for what we believe, the evidence will compel them to belief. “Those who take a more evidentialist approach believe in the

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place for using reason, arguments, logic, facts, evidence, and data in evangelism.” (253)

Chan uses a *modified presuppositionalist* approach: “I frequently use reasoning and arguments and evidence to dismantle a nonbeliever’s presuppositions. Once we’ve established some common ground, I can present the Christian worldview as an attractive alternative to their faulty worldview.” (254–255)

Chan’s book will help you grow your skills and confidence in these three types of evangelism.

The relationship of evangelism to missionary work

Missionaries have understood something important about the work of evangelism that lay leaders have begun to realize in the last several years: evangelism must connect the gospel to culture. Chan explains the relationship between gospel and culture in two ways.

First, “The gospel is transcultural because it is true for all cultures. In the Old Testament, God is the God of both Israel and the nations. In the New Testament, salvation is for both the Jews and the gentiles... The gospel is universal and normative for all peoples at all times and in all places.” (132) And yet, secondly, “the gospel is not acultural, as if it hovers above culture and is devoid of any culture. Instead, the gospel is deeply enculturated,” which is why “we have to explain the Bible’s culture whenever we give a story or talk from the Bible.” (132, 133)

There’s another aspect to the gospel-culture relationship: “The person we are trying to evangelize is also enculturated. They are not a person who hovers above culture and is devoid of any cultural influences. Instead, this person is deeply enculturated. And this can vary widely, even within the same geographical area.... Each would have different cultural concerns, gospel interpretation, cultural communication, and cultural application.” (133)

Not only are the evangelized enculturated—so are evangelists. “We ourselves as evangelists ... are not free-floating people hovering above the culture, devoid of any culture. We are not acultural. We each have a cultural accent and a cultural flavor. We are deeply enculturated, and this will affect our understanding and application of the gospel.” (135)

Like missionaries who evangelize tribes in Papua New Guinea or the streets of Mumbai, when we engage in evangelism we need to understand “There is no form for presenting the gospel that hovers above a culture, devoid of culture. We have to pick a particular form that speaks to

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After his resurrection and before his ascension, Jesus said to his disciples, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (Jn. 20:21). But does this apply to all Christians or just certain ones, like the disciples? Are all Christians evangelists?

As we have seen, “the essence of evangelism is its message, the gospel of Jesus Christ. Evangelism is defined by its message, not by its method, medium, or audience.” (37) Since evangelism has nothing to do with the *kind of Christian*—professional pastor or evangelist, lay Christian or leader—but with the *content of the message*—the gospel of Jesus Christ—all Christians are evangelists, called and sent by Jesus to make his unbelievable news more believable.

This will look different for different Christians. As Chan explains, “there are different models of evangelism in the Bible: sometimes it’s a logical presentation of ideas, sometimes it’s an event with emotional impact, and sometimes it’s through stories.” Furthermore, different people experience God’s regenerating work in different ways. And because “people will be persuaded in different ways—through logic, experiences, or personal examples” (38)—this leaves the door open for Christians to use different methods to evangelize.

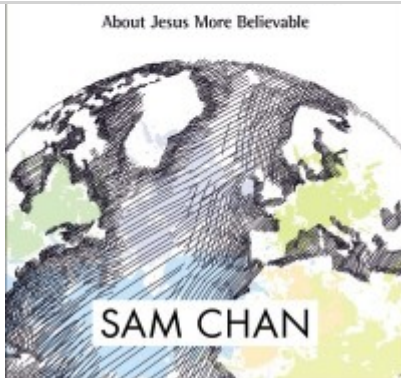
“So the challenge for us when we evangelize is to be open to different methods, mediums, and entry points. We don’t have to evangelize the same way that we were evangelized. And we don’t have to impose our learning styles on other people.” (38) We do, however, need to take seriously our calling as evangelists. “God uses our gospel presentations as natural means for his supernatural regenerating work. This keeps us humble about our abilities. But it also encourages us to keep doing the work of an evangelist, because if God so wills it, he will use our words to move someone from death to life.” (38)

Learn more about becoming a flexible and effective evangelist in Chan's *Evangelism in a Skeptical World*.

Chan's methods in *Evangelism In a Skeptical World* will help you **make the unbelievable news about Jesus more believable**. You will learn how to do evangelism in the context of a world that is skeptical about faith, Christianity, and the church. How?

Combining theological and biblical insights of classic evangelistic training with the latest insights from missions and missiology on contextualization, cultural hermeneutics, and

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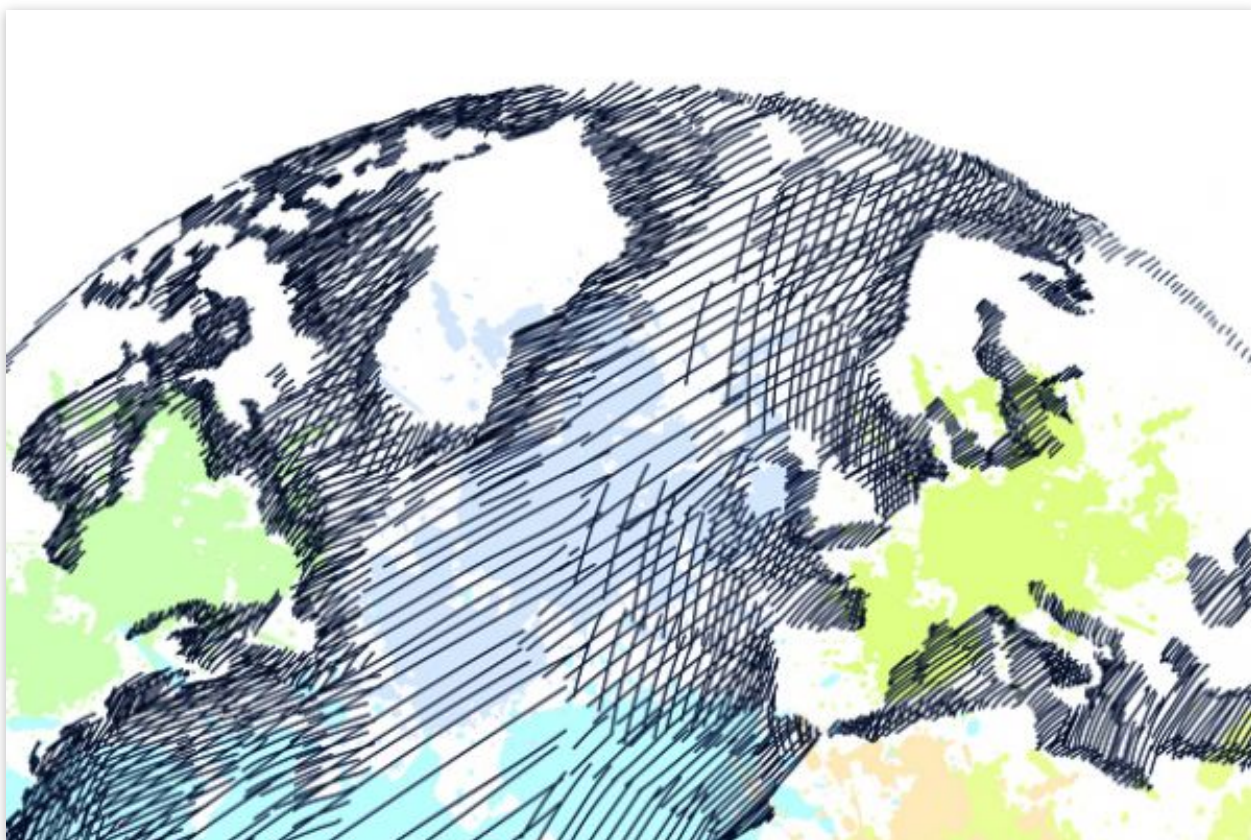
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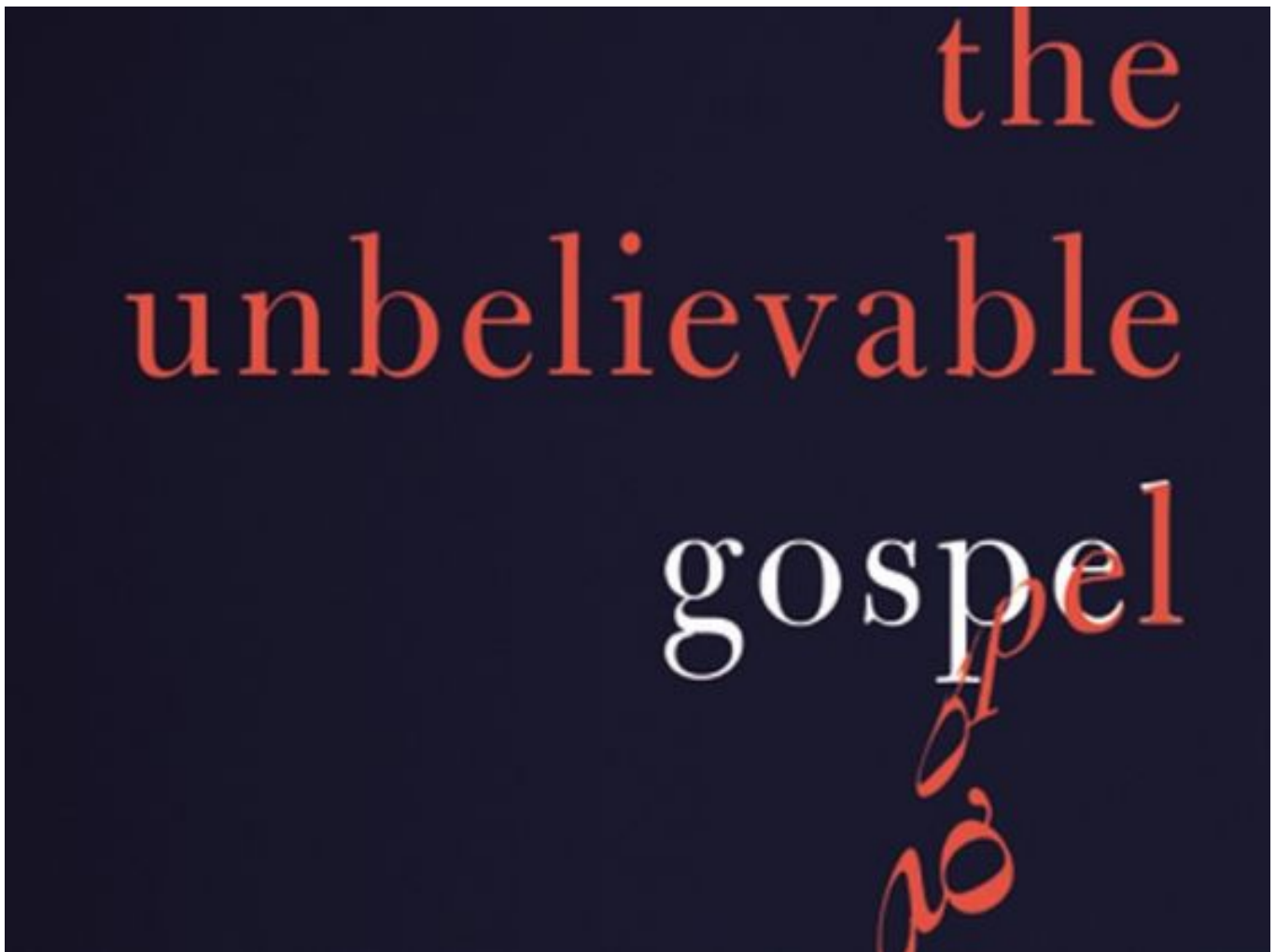
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