

An Occasional Essay: **Understanding the Term 'Pre-Christian'**

It is not easy to make sense of the invitation "invite your pre- and non-Christian friends" to an evangelistic meeting where the gospel will be presented in a "non-threatening manner".

How not-threatening can one get, when the issues are either eternal life or eternal death? The Lord himself said:

"I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish"
Luke 13:3

Now, the term "pre-Christian" really puzzles me. No matter how catchy the term may be in some quarters one should carefully consider whether one should use it.

It causes confusion on three counts.

1 Does the Bible contain any teaching about 'pre-Christians'?

What did Paul remind the Christians at Ephesus concerning the time when they were not Christians yet, that is, when they were without Christ?

"At that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ."

Ephesians 2:12, 13

Paul does not see an intermediate state where a man or woman is "pre-with Christ". Such a person would not be called a "pre-Christian", he or she would be a "non-Christian", not possessing the blessings belonging to Christians.

2 Does the term 'pre-Christian' mean the 'Elect'?

Scripture teaches that God in His mercy and sovereignty calls people to Himself. That is, He elects whom He wants to be saved. This is first seen in the election of the remnant of the nation of Israel. In the book of Romans, just before chapter 9 where Paul dwells on the spiritual fate of the people called Israel, he speaks at length on how God works all things together **"for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose"**.

Romans 8:28

Therefore it may be argued that in using the term 'pre-Christian' one is merely emphasising what the Scripture teaches here in Romans and in many other places.

'Pre-Christian' simply means the 'elect' or 'the called'. What's wrong with using the term? There are two good reasons for not using the term.

First, while the Bible teaches us that there are people whom God has called, it does not tell us how to distinguish the 'called' (elect) from the 'uncalled'.

Second, to be consistent and logical, if one regards the elect as 'pre-Christians', one must then regard the non-elect as non-Christians. If the non-elect are **not** non-Christians, then who are they?

If the non-elect are 'non-Christians', why are we inviting them to evangelistic meetings together with the 'pre-Christians' to hear the Gospel - since the 'non-elect' will not respond favourably?

3 Can we really tell a 'pre-Christian' from a 'non-Christian'?

How do we judge whether a person is a 'pre-Christian'? Is friendliness one criterion? True, it is easier and more pleasant a task to invite a friendly person to a Gospel meeting than one who is not. However this judgement of friendliness is more often than not tainted by our sensitivities and our attitudes to people.

What about openness towards the Bible as a criterion? There are indeed many friendly people who hear the Word gladly. However, as Jesus taught, like the sowing of seed on rock or shallow soil these yield no harvest. How, then, do we know who a 'pre-Christian' is, so that we might pray and work hard to bring that person into the kingdom because our labours are more likely to bear fruit?

But we have just seen that outward friendly or receptive behaviour are not always reliable yardsticks. On the other hand a person may appear argumentative and even rude and be close to the kingdom. We would have classified that person as a 'non-Christian' rather than a 'pre-Christian'. Real-life evangelism is full of such examples. But, you say, "In practice, we should invite everyone!"

That's precisely the point - why make the non-existent distinction between "pre-Christian" and "non-Christian" in the first place to cause confusion in the minds of those, especially young believers, who are trying to bring the lost to Christ?

Jesus said:

"I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. "

John 8:12

Anyone who is a nonbeliever, without Christ, is in spiritual darkness. Darkness means what it says. 'Darkness' is not 'pre-light'. Assuming and then telling someone that you

think he or she is a 'pre-Christian' is to give him or her a wrong signal. It is an anomalous term, more confusing than helpful.

The missionary thrust of the Bible is towards all humankind, regardless of a person's spiritual receptivity of the Gospel. Paul's commission to evangelise from the Lord Jesus was very clear:

"... to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified in Me."

Acts 26:18

May our own humble labours lead to more people trusting our Lord Jesus Christ.

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