The Gift of a Bible:
An Atheist's Call to Make Our Case

Bob Perry

St. Francis of Assisi may have died 800 years ago, but his influence still looms. He was a man who venerated nature and lived a life of great sacrifice in service to God and his church. But within the Christian ecosystem, he has become most famous for an adage that strikes a chord with anyone who is serious about sharing their faith:

Preach the Gospel always. If necessary, use words.

The modern interpretation of Assisi's exhortation is clear. Our charge is to love people into the kingdom, not argue them there.

A Gospel Without Words?

On one level there is no denying that, "who you *are* speaks so loudly that no one can hear what you *say*." We certainly don't want the life we live to deny everything about the faith we claim to represent. But is the Franciscan inversion of this exhortation also true? Can we proclaim the message through our actions alone?

The problem here is that the Gospel makes propositional truth claims about the nature of the world, the nature of man, and the remedy for man's rebellion against God. It's a story about reality. And it's only "good news" if it's actually true. So, how can we share the propositional truth claims of such a message and explain their implications without using words or giving answers?

I contend that we can't. Furthermore, the attitude that says we can is not only harmful, but it also does violence to the Gospel it claims to love. This contention is not my own. A rabid atheist will back me up.

The Gift of a Bible

Penn Jillette and his partner, Raymond Teller, have been entertaining Las Vegas audiences for years. Their mixture of magic, music, and commentary – the *Penn & Teller* show – is the longest-running show at the same hotel in Las Vegas history. Jillette is a magician, actor, and inventor. He is also a hard-core atheist – so adamant about his denial of God's existence that at one point in his life he is said to have owned three cars with vanity license plates that read: "atheist," "nogod," and "godless." "Strangely enough," says Jillette, "they wouldn't give me 'infidel.' He was also a happy participant in YouTube's viral "blasphemy challenge," in which participants publicly mock and denounce the Holy Spirit.

Penn Jillette is no friend of Christianity. But he has a message that every Christian should take to heart.

In July 2010, Jillette posted a video online in which he shared the story of a man who approached him after one of his performances. The man was extremely complimentary of the *Penn & Teller* show. He said he enjoyed Jillette's honesty, his use of language, and his talent. The man was polite and humble. And he came bearing a gift.

"I was here last night," said the man, "I brought this for you." The man handed Jillette a pocket Bible containing the New Testament and the book of Psalms. Penn Jillette was genuinely humbled and impressed by the actions and attitude of this kind Christian man. And he is quite direct about how he received the gesture.

> I don't respect people who don't proselytize. If you believe there's a heaven and hell … and if you believe that people could be going to hell, or not getting eternal life … and you think that it's not worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward … How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? *How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that*? If I believed beyond the shadow of a doubt that a truck was bearing down on you and you didn't believe it, there's a certain point where I tackle you. And this is *more* important than that (emphasis mine).

Misquoting Francis

Most of us don't have a lot in common with a rabid atheist Las Vegas showman who mocks the Holy Spirit. But every Christian would do well to take seriously Penn Jillette's reflection. Not only does it fly in the face of the just-love-them-into-the-kingdom mindset, but it also comports with what Assisi actually said … and with what he did.

It turns out the legendary quote attributed to St. Francis is nothing but a modern corruption of the words he actually wrote in 1221 AD:

> Let none of the brothers preach contrary to the form and institution of the church … Nevertheless, let all the brothers preach by their works.[1]

Notice that Francis did not render preaching the gospel a contingent option. Instead, he linked words and actions directly together.

Francis of Assisi devoted himself to the kind of life for which he is now known after being *convicted by a sermon* he heard in 1209. He took a vow of poverty, felt connected to nature and the beauty of the creation, and demonstrated empathy for others. But he

was also known for the powerful sermons he delivered. He lived out the Gospel, and he was happy to tell others about it.

Words Are Always Necessary

Arguments and evidence are far from arrogant intellectual add-ons to the Gospel. They are integral to it. God saturated our world with truths that could never be adequately expressed through our actions alone. There are plenty of examples of militant atheists who have turned to God after hearing about them. C. S. Lewis, Antony Flew, Lee Strobel, and J. Warner Wallace come to mind. Penn Jillette isn't on that list – yet. That's his choice, not ours. Don't hate him for it. Be winsome and kind. But by all means, don't be silent.

Video available at: https://www.youtube.com/embed/6md638smQd8

NOTES

[1] St. Francis of Assisi, "The Writing of St. Francis of Assisi: Rules of the Friars Minor," *Rule of 1221, Chapter 4, Section 17*, available at: https://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/wosf/wosf06.htm