

Book Review

Evangelism in a Skeptical World: How to Make the Unbelievable News About Jesus More Believable

By Sam Chan

Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018

288 pages

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Reviewed by Cameron D. Armstrong, author of *Listening Between the Lines: Thinking Missiologically about Romanian Culture* (2018). Cameron (PhD, Biola University) serves with the International Mission Board in Bucharest, Romania, where he teaches at the Bucharest Baptist Theological Institute. Cameron's research interests include orality, theological education, and Romania.

The word “evangelism” evokes strong feelings for most. For many Christians, evangelism is frightening and unnatural, even though many believe that it ought to be a defining mark of a true believer. Enter Sam Chan - an Asian Australian evangelist with a Ph.D. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Based on his experiences in personal and large gathering evangelism encounters, Chan's *Evangelism in a Skeptical World* addresses Christians' fears in a highly practical and theologically sound manner.

Chan's book is divided into ten chapters. Beginning with a “theology of evangelism,” the chapters survey such topics as evangelism among postmoderns, contextualization, crafting a gospel presentation, delivering evangelistic talks, and apologetics. Throughout the book, Chan reminds us that evangelism cannot be defined by methods, since there are many different evangelistic methods in the Bible. Instead, evangelism is defined by the message of the gospel. Chan therefore explains that evangelism is “our human effort of proclaiming the message of the gospel” and involves trusting God to use our efforts for his purposes (24). One of the pitfalls Christians face in

evangelism training, according to Chan, is the effort to discover a one-size-fits-all approach. Chan spends considerable time evaluating previous attempts at such methods, such as the Four Spiritual Laws (popular in the United States) and Two Ways to Live (popular in Australia). While these proved excellent evangelism tools in previous generations, these methods may not resonate with non-believers in the skeptical, postmodern world. In engaging postmoderns, whose plausibility structures are informed more from their community and experiences than cognitive data, better approaches might involve inviting non-believers into your community and sharing stories from your own life and from the Bible. In doing so, Christians will better understand what non-believers are truly longing for (what Chan calls their “existential cry”) and then be able to show how life with Jesus Christ best completes their “cultural storyline” (163).

The book possesses myriad strengths, yet I will mention only three. First, Chan balances well his rigorous theology of evangelism with cultural sensitivity. He has clearly thought deeply on both sides to present a work of “critical contextualization” (to use language Chan himself borrows from missiologist Paul Hiebert). Second, readers will find Chan’s insertion of “storytelling the gospel” both informative and freeing. Instead of trying to memorize evangelism methods, Chan demonstrates the power of using stories from both the Bible and the Christian’s life, especially among skeptics in the postmodern West. Third, readers from North America especially will find Chan’s chapters on understanding postmoderns and cultural hermeneutics worthwhile. Not only does Chan elucidate how postmodernism challenges traditional evangelism methods, but he also exposes how a society’s “cultural texts” often point to biblical metaphors.

As for weaknesses, I will also mention three. First, Chan does not address the reality that often Christians may not have close non-Christian friends. Instead, Chan merely assumes they do. Chan’s strategy of inviting non-believers out for coffee a few times and then over for dinner for deeper conversation is indeed a brilliant idea, yet may be unrealistic if the Christian has no non-believing friends in the first place. Second, while describing the need for evangelism to use both guilt and shame language, Chan asserts that the apostles in the New Testament only used guilt language when speaking with Jews and shame language when engaging the pagan Greeks. Even a cursory reading of the book of Romans will show this not to be the case, underscored by recent works such as Jackson Wu’s *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes*. Third, Chan’s emphasis on topical preaching as more relevant in today’s world may ruffle more than a few feathers among the evangelical establishment. Even though Chan argues the point thoroughly, such an argument may find few adherents in circles committed to exposition as the homiletic apex.

Yet these are minor weaknesses that do not detract from the book’s

message. For brevity, cultural understanding, and winsomeness, Chan is to be commended for producing a truly helpful guide. Indeed, I have come across few evangelism resources more practical than *Evangelism in a Skeptical World*. Church leaders in the Global West, including North America, will find encouragement, challenge, and practical tips for equipping Christians to neither fear nor ignore the biblical command to evangelize.

References

Wu, J. (2019). *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.