

THE CHALLENGE FROM PLURALISM TO THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL*

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During the past several years I have tried to read a great deal of the literature on pluralism, and to think it through from an avowedly evangelical stance. At the same time, my continuing interest in evangelism and in evangelistic preaching have ensured that the two topics—pluralism and the preaching of the gospel—would butt against each other.

Perhaps I should confess right away that what I am presenting to you is a small part of a much longer work.¹ There are two entailments. First, I shall set aside the bulkiest documentation, reserving it for the fuller work. Second, I shall avoid in these lectures a host of topics that concern the student of contemporary pluralism. These topics have profound bearings on what we mean by “the gospel,” and on how we are to preach it. For example, there is a complex array of hermeneutical issues, largely packaged under the terms “postmodernity” and “deconstruction,” that I shall barely introduce here. Moreover, the sheer empirical diversity in America at the end of this millennium raises a host of questions about the prospects of the American experiment in democracy, if the inherited cultural baggage continues to fragment and dissipate, leaving behind nothing more than individualism and pragmatism. These questions touch our school systems, the judiciary, our legislative bodies, the relations between church and state—and thus they impinge both on our

* This is the first of two lectures presented at the Criswell College for the annual Criswell Theological Lecture series.

¹ See D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

understanding of the faith, and on our attitude toward the Constitution. Moreover, the subject of pluralism must be probed not only as it describes the sheer diversity of the culture at large, but also as it pertains to the multiplying diversity within the confessional church. Self-confessed evangelicals now entertain, and defend, a wider range of opinions on a host of critical topics than at any time this century: the fate of the unevangelized, conditional immortality as opposed to a self-conscious experience of an eternal hell, even fundamental disputes over the nature of justification.

But though I shall allude to many of these topics, and more besides, my focus in these two lectures is narrower. I want to evaluate with you the kinds of impact the various forms of pluralism are making in this country, and consider some lessons we should learn from this evaluation.

The Impact of Pluralism

“Pluralism” is a surprisingly tricky word in modern discussion. Some use it in combination with various spheres: cultural pluralism, ideological pluralism, intellectual pluralism, religious pluralism, and so forth. For our purposes, it will be useful to consider, not the spheres in which pluralism is found, but three kinds of phenomena to which the word commonly refers:

1. Empirical Pluralism

This is what D. Tracy would prefer to call “plurality.” “Plurality,” he writes, “is a fact. Pluralism is one of the many possible evaluations of that fact.”² But although a few scholars have followed him in this usage, most still use “pluralism,” in one of its uses, to refer to the sheer diversity of race, value systems, heritage, language, culture, and religion in America—indeed, not only in America, but in many Western nations. The United States is the largest Jewish, Irish, and Swedish nation in the world; it is the second largest black nation, and soon it will become the third largest Hispanic nation.

It is possible to overstate this diversity. J. Butler vigorously demonstrates how diverse American life and culture were in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and correspondingly depreciates the degree of diversity reflected in the nation today.³ But although his work is a useful foil for those who exaggerate modern empirical pluralism, it must be insisted that the range of contemporary diversity is, on any scale,

² “Christianity in the Wider Context: Demands and Transformation,” *Worldviews and Warrants: Plurality and Authority in Theology*, ed. W. Schweiker and P. M. Anderson (New York: University Press of America, 1987) 2.

³ J. Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

vastly greater than has ever been experienced in the Republic before. Religiously, Roman Catholicism is increasing in numbers, owing in part to the influx of Hispanics. The best estimates of the number of Muslims in the US range around 1.4 million. Numerous studies document the rise of new age religions and the revitalization of various forms of neopaganism. Most demographers insist that if present trends continue, WASPs (White, Anglo-Saxon Protestants) will be in a minority (about 47%) by the year A.D. 2000.⁴ None of this was foreseen by the Founding Fathers; little of it was foreseen forty years ago.

For those who are interested in preaching the gospel, the result, often unrecognized, is that the kind of preparation undertaken to address the gospel to some parts of the culture may be woefully inadequate to address some other parts. The person steeped in, say, Southern, white, Baptist culture may have some difficulty relating to Catholic Hispanics (even if that person successfully leaps the language hurdle). I am not referring only to matters of personal taste. Very few of those who are listening to me today, I suspect, have spent much time thinking through the best way to share their faith with devout Roman Catholics, Hispanic or otherwise. So the cultural barrier has a bearing on the preaching of the gospel. Consider another example. A graduate of a few years ago from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School went to Tulsa, Oklahoma, to plant a church. Precisely how and why he was led to plant a church in a city of 800 churches, "the buckle on the Bible belt," I am not sure. In any case, he says he spent an entire year in Tulsa before he met a single person who denied being a Christian. It took him quite a while before he thought through what kinds of questions he had to ask to get by the preliminary barrier, and discover whether or not there was real, vital faith in the people with whom he talked, or not.

But these are still easy examples. Try witnessing to someone who does not believe that objective truth in the religious arena is possible; to someone who "hears" all your religious vocabulary in a new age matrix; to someone who is automatically repulsed by every instance of "prose-lytism." Add in local Orthodox Jews, local Muslims, local Buddhists, local Mormons, and so forth. Recall that witnessing in the New England states, or in the Pacific Northwest, is going to prove vastly different from participating in the outreach program of a Southern Baptist Church in Dixie, and some of the dimensions of the challenge begin to surge into view.

2. *Cherished Pluralism*

By "cherished pluralism" I mean to add an additional ingredient to empirical pluralism. While some writers and thinkers (though certainly

⁴ For some useful statistical data, see G. Gallup, Jr., and J. Castelli, *The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90s* (New York: Macmillan, 1989).

not all) on the New Right view empirical pluralism as a threat to stability, order, good government, and perhaps also to biblical Christianity, it is important to remember that although many ordinary Americans do not want to know a lot of people very different from themselves, they want America as a whole to retain its diversity. In other words, for them empirical pluralism is not only a raw datum, it is a good thing. In the words of L. Newbigin, "It has become a commonplace to say that we live in a pluralist society—not merely a society which is in fact plural in the variety of cultures, religions and lifestyles which it embraces, but pluralist in the sense that this plurality is celebrated as things to be approved and cherished."⁵

A catena of attitudes is borne along by this outlook. The more this diversity is praised, the more one is inclined to look askance on someone who appears to threaten it by "proselytizing" other citizens. But the issue is in reality much deeper. It is perhaps best understood by linking together the first two points. It may be helpful to stake out some territory by means of a quotation from McGrath. Referring to earlier periods in the history of the church, he writes:⁶

The Christian proclamation has always taken place in a pluralist world, in competition with rival religious and intellectual convictions. The emergence of the gospel within the matrix of Judaism, the expansion of the gospel in a Hellenistic milieu, the early Christian expansion in pagan Rome, the establishment of the Mar Thoma church in southeastern India—all of these are examples of situations in which Christian apologists and theologians, not to mention ordinary Christian believers, have been aware that there are alternatives to Christianity on offer. Equally, it is perfectly obvious that cultural pluralism exists. Yet this poses no decisive difficulties for Christianity, in theory or in practice. The ability of the gospel to transcend cultural barriers is one of its chief glories.

But a couple of centuries of cultural dominance by Protestants have changed that perception. We still *expect* to be in the driver's seat, and thus we overlook that throughout much of the church's history, in most parts of the world, the gospel has had to make its way against alien perspectives, and frequently a plurality of them. McGrath continues:⁷

It is quite possible that his insight may have been lost to English and American writers of the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. For such writers pluralism might have meant little more than a variety of forms of Protestantism, while "different religions" would probably have been understood to refer simply to the age-old tension between Protestant-

⁵ *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 1.

⁶ A. E. McGrath, "The Challenge of Pluralism for the Contemporary Christian Church," *JETS* 35 (1992) 361.

⁷ McGrath, 360–61.

ism and Roman Catholicism. Pluralism was situated and contained within a Christian context. . . .

This perspective can lead Christian preachers to feel on the outside of things, and decidedly defensive, when they have no right to: they should *expect* opposition, confrontation, diverse perspectives. Of course, the popular cherishing of empirical pluralism is partly a self-conscious rebellion against the heritage of the Christian West, partly an ill-thought-out declaration of freedom, partly the fruit of rugged individualism that wants to determine "spirituality" on its own terms. Certainly it is a novel development in the experience of Western Protestants of the last two centuries or so. But in a large historical and geographical framework, the pressures of pluralism should not catch us by surprise.

This set of values makes its impact both within the church and without. Within the church, there are many Christians who, while retaining orthodox beliefs at a theoretical level, are very uncomfortable with any sermon that *excludes* anybody or any view, except what they judge to be the most peripheral. Careful treatments of hell are rare, because they are felt to be embarrassing. People are often invited to come, but less often told what they must leave behind. Thus, the pressures of pluralism have the effect of surreptitiously encouraging us to change the shape of the gospel. The gospel is no longer good news for those who are rebels and alienated from God, telling them about the *one* way by which they may be reconciled to the living God. Far from it, without ever overly and candidly denying that there is only one way, the gospel is repackaged to become the good news that a domesticated deity is available on demand to give hurting people the abundant life. Thus the gospel is transmuted into something unrecognizable, while millions are unaware that it has changed at all.

Outside the church, the impact of cherished pluralism tends to make the more conservative of us circle the wagons; it tends to make the less conservative of us withdraw from evangelism (which is understood, in this framework, to be nothing more than inexcusable proselytism). Neither development fosters great gospel preaching.

3. *Philosophical and Hermeneutical Pluralism*

This is, by far, the most serious development. Philosophical pluralism has developed many approaches in support of one stance: viz., any notion that a particular ideological or religious claim is intrinsically superior to another is *necessarily* wrong. The only absolute creed is the creed of pluralism. No religion has the right to pronounce itself right or true, and the others false, or even (in the majority view) relatively inferior.

The dominant means by which this stance has been supported are four: (a) In the epistemological arena, all forms of positivism, in the West, are declared dead. The subjectivism of the “new hermeneutic,” for all its proper place, has largely triumphed; (b) The entailment is not only a philosophical pluralism, but a hermeneutical pluralism. Not only is the existence of objective truth called into question, but the sheer diversity of “readings” of texts is encouraged, with very little check from close study of the text itself; (c) This hermeneutical potpourri has sometimes depended on certain kinds of literary theory; and (d) At the same time, the social sciences have expanded their bounds to offer not only phenomenological data, but naturalistic *explanations* of everything that takes place—including religious conversions or powerful revivals.

It would be inappropriate here to trace out the intellectual heritage of deconstruction, and to introduce its major players. It will be sufficient to remind you that J. Derrida, viewed by many as the father of deconstruction, is a brilliant master of paradox and whimsy. To deconstruct a text is to analyze it for all sorts of individual semantic components which are then rearranged and fitted into other grids, producing unpredictable and unforeseen semantic assemblages. The text (a word that can refer to paintings or sculptures as easily as it can refer to words on a page) is of relatively little independent importance; the reader is everything. Foucault stresses the inherent ambiguity of texts; the name of S. Fish is associated with the dictum that all “knowledge” is a social construct, belonging, as it does, to a body of cultural presuppositions that might well be challenged in another culture. P. Ricoeur adopts much the same stance, but works out the theory much more closely in the field of literature.

Of the many distinctions that have been attempted between modernism and postmodernism, perhaps this is the most common: modernism still believed in the objectivity of knowledge, and, in its most optimistic form, held that ultimately knowledge would revolutionize the world, squeeze God to the periphery or perhaps abandon him to his own devices, and build an edifice of glorious knowledge to the great God Science. But this stance has largely been abandoned in the postmodernism that characterizes most Western universities. Deconstructionists have been most vociferous in denouncing the modernism vision. They hold that language is a social construct. Its meaning is inherent neither in reality nor in texts per se. Texts will invariably be interpreted against the backdrop of the interpreter’s social “home.”

The new hermeneutic and deconstruction are complex and difficult subjects. It is tempting to think that at least some of their challenge owes not a little to a certain kind of intellectual arrogance that wants to keep the masses at bay, excluded from the fine tone and subtle

argumentation of the intellectual elite.⁸ But whatever the origins of these disciplines, many of the insights generated by them are extremely valuable, especially when deployed by thinkers who are a good deal less skeptical than are many of the leading scholars in the movements themselves. Be that as it may, there are three entailments beyond reasonable dispute, and all of them have enormous impact on anyone who wants to preach the gospel.

First, in one form or another these ways of looking at reality have made an impact on virtually all the arts disciplines, and on not a few philosophers of science as well. Not only in English 101 are students introduced to Derrida and Fish, but in sociology, history, philosophy, law, and anthropology. In every instance the net effect is predictable: while rightly decrying the hubris that thinks human beings can understand anything perfectly, that talks glibly about absolute truth without recognizing that all human knowledge is in some ways culture-bound, these movements unite in depreciating truth itself. Theory has thus buttressed the empirical and cherished pluralism of the age, generating a philosophical basis for relativism. Unlike the old-fashioned liberalism, which took two or three generations to work its way down from the seminaries and the universities to the ordinary person in the pew, this brand of liberalism has made it all the way down to the person in the street in about half a generation.

The result is what S. Carter calls a “culture of disbelief.”⁹ Carter has courageously and insightfully chronicled how we have moved beyond mere civil religion (to use the expression that R. Bellah made popular by his famous 1970 essay) to the place where modern politics and law trivialize all values, all religious devotion. This stance is now in the air we breath. The extent to which it has invaded the church is troubling; still more troubling, for the preacher of the gospel, is the extent to which it is everywhere assumed, especially by middle and upper classes, by the media and print elite, by almost all who set the agenda for the nation.

Take, for example, the recent interpretations of the Constitution’s “separation” clause. Whether or not these interpretations have been rightly construed, the tendency in public education has been to be silent on virtually all matters religious. How can one be historically accurate in one’s treatment of the Pilgrim Fathers if one knows nothing about the history of Western Christianity? My son attends grade four in a public

⁸ See the provocative and analogous thesis of J. Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia 1880-1939* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1992).

⁹ S. L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic, 1993).

school which, by most standards, is excellent. For their Christmas concert this year—or, more accurately, their Season’s concert—there was not a single song that had anything whatsoever to do with Christmas or Hanukkah. By “anything whatsoever” I exclude not only explicitly religious pieces but also songs of the “Jingle Bells” variety. I have never heard, in ten songs, so many eminently forgettable lines of well-sung poetry. It was all entirely harmless. But it was also a sign that the culture of disbelief is striking again. When I was a child, all of us sang Christmas carols at school, at home, and at church. It would have been hard to find a child who could not recite the words, “Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see / Hail, th’incarnate Deity.” Today the schools are becoming silent; there is little singing at home, for it has largely been displaced by VCRs; and in the church, there is more and more “special music” performed for us, with less and less congregational participation that ensures people *learn* truths through song.

We are thus ensuring that an entire generation will be ignorant of the most elementary structures of the Judeo-Christian heritage on which our civilization has been nurtured. Worse (from the perspective of the preaching of the gospel), they will not have the “hooks” on which to hang the appeals to the gospel that have been our staple. I recognize, of course, that with the rising empirical pluralism in the land, adjustments in the public school education system are inevitable, and in some instances desirable. But massive silence regarding all things religious, a silence fostered by our culture of disbelief, is not the best option. As Jewish talk-show host D. Prager puts it:

Liberals are always talking about pluralism, but that is not what they mean. . . . In public school, Jews don’t meet Christians. Christians don’t meet Hindus. Everybody meets nothing. That is, as I explain to Jews all the time, why their children so easily inter-marry. Jews don’t marry Christians. Non-Jewish Jews marry non-Christian Christians. Jews for nothing marry Christians for nothing. They get along great because they both affirm nothing. They have everything in common—nothing. That’s not pluralism.

Or, more accurately, that’s not the first kind of pluralism, i.e., empirical pluralism, but it is most certainly the kind of culture postmodern philosophical pluralism wants to build.

Second, the rise of the new hermeneutic and of deconstruction has sapped the faith of many an undergraduate, and introduced a raft of new challenges to those interested in evangelizing them. Thus, Miss Christian goes off to the local state university, full of zeal and the knowledge of a few fundamental truths. There she will not find lecturers who will devote much time to overturning her truths. Rather, she will find many lecturers convincing her that the meaning in her religion, as in all religion, is merely communal bias, and therefore is relative, subjective. No religion

can make valid claims of a transcendent nature. Truth, whatever it is, does not reside in an object, historical or otherwise, that can be read off by finite human beings; rather, it resides in fallible, faulty, and finite knowers who themselves look at things a certain way only because they belong to a certain section of society. Miss Christian is told, a trifle condescendingly, that if her religion helps her, she should be grateful, but that no intelligent person could possibly believe, this side of Derrida, Foucault, and Fish, that her beliefs have a transcendent claim on everybody everywhere. Thus, without overtly denying her faith, Miss Christian discovers that its vitality has been sapped. It has been relativized, trivialized, marginalized. Without ever having had a single one of its major tenets overturned by historical or other argument, the whole edifice of Christian truth has been detached from the objective status it once held. Miss Christian drifts off, and it may take years before she thinks seriously about Jesus again—if she ever does.

For similar reasons, evangelism among university students has changed a great deal since I was an undergraduate. If a Christian offered testimony thirty years ago, it was possible to get into a strong debate, sometimes even a heated one, over the validity of the truth claims that were being advanced. Part of intelligent Christian witness on a secular campus was, for example, to muster the arguments for the historical resurrection of Jesus, to display the veracity and coherence of the Scriptures, and to demonstrate the awesome wisdom and love in God's plan of redemption. You can, of course, do all these things today, but the first question is likely to be: "Yes, but what about all the Hindus?" In other words, granted the empirical pluralism of our age, why should your particular brand of religion be thought better than anyone else's? And granted the philosophical pluralism of our age, your expression of belief, though very interesting and even at times compelling, is no more than the subjective product of your religious community. It is your depiction of religious experience, decisively shaped by who you are; it is reality for you, but it is not culture-transcending reality. Nothing is.

In the same way, a friend may listen to your testimony, and then smile quietly and say, "I'm so glad that your faith helps you. As for me, I don't really need it, and frankly I find it impossible to believe what you do. I enjoy your friendship, but please don't push your religion down my throat. We've each got to find our own way, and your way isn't mine."

Where do you begin?

Third, under the impact of the new hermeneutic and of deconstruction, the nature of tolerance has changed.¹⁰ In a relatively free and open

¹⁰ The next few paragraphs are adapted from D. A. Carson, "Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism," *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F. H. Henry*, ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 38–39.

society, the best forms of tolerance are those that are open to and tolerant of people, even when there are strong disagreements with their ideas. This toleration for people, if not always for their ideas, engenders a measure of civility in national discourse while still fostering spirited debate over the relative merits of this or that idea. Today, however, tolerance in many Western society increasingly focuses on ideas, not people.

The result of adopting this new brand of tolerance is less discussion of the merits of competing ideas—and less civility. There is less discussion because toleration of diverse ideas demands that we avoid criticizing the opinions of others; in addition, there is almost no discussion where the ideas at issue are of the religious sort that claim to be valid for everyone everywhere: that sort of notion is right outside the modern “plausibility structure” (to use P. Berger’s term), and has to be trashed. There is less civility because there is no inherent demand, in this new practice of tolerance, to be tolerant of people.

In the religious field, this means that few people will be offended by the multiplying new religions. No matter how wacky, no matter how flimsy their intellectual credentials, no matter how subjective and uncontrolled, no matter how blatantly self-centered, no matter how obviously their gods have been manufactured to foster human self-promotion, the media will treat them with fascination and even a degree of respect. But if any religion claims that in some measure other religions are wrong, a line has been crossed and resentment is immediately stirred up: pluralism (in the third sense) has been challenged. Exclusiveness is the one religious idea that cannot be tolerated. Correspondingly, *proselytism* is a dirty word.

What is sometimes forgotten is that this vision of tolerance is, at one level, akin to the view of religious tolerance in some remarkably intolerant countries. In some Muslim countries, for example, it is perfectly acceptable to *be* a Christian; but it may be illegal and is certainly dangerous to *become* a Christian. What is overlooked is that genuine religious freedom necessarily includes the right to convert and to encourage others to convert. At the heart of such freedom is the assumption that ideas matter and that they must be argued out in the marketplace, and that individuals have the right to change their minds and adopt new positions even if everyone around them is convinced that their ideas are preposterous. Of course, these rights are still maintained in the United States. By and large, however, they are not cherished, for the focus of tolerance has changed. Philosophical pluralism has managed to set in place certain “rules” for playing the game of religion—rules that transcend any single religion.

I do not for a moment mean that everyone plays by these rules. In fact, it is becoming clear that this third form of pluralism tends to militate, in time, against the first two. Instead of a rich diversity of claims

arguing it out in the marketplace (i.e., empirical pluralism), in what Neuhaus calls “the naked public square,”¹¹ and instead of this diversity being cherished as the best way to ensure freedom and to pursue truth (cherished pluralism), the pressures from philosophical pluralism tend to squash any strong opinion that makes exclusive truth claims—all, that is, except the dogmatic opinion that all dogmatic opinions are to be ruled out. By way of reaction, various groups respond by becoming defensive. They circle the wagons and yell slogans. Small wonder, then, that S. S. Harakas can affirm that the prevailing worldview in America is not pluralistic (at least, not in the first and second senses, as I have labelled them), but atomistic and antireligious.¹²

When philosophical pluralism is allied, in the popular mood, with the notion of progress, so that those who disagree are often pictured as quaint vestiges of a bygone era, the pressure to conform is enormous, since the notion of “progress” has been a watchword of Western culture for at least two centuries. Recently, the idea of progress has come under vigorous and long-deserved attack.¹³ Moreover, in university circles deconstruction itself is just beginning to be “deconstructed.” But as far as I can make out, philosophical pluralism is still the dominant ideology, and it produces enormous challenges to the preacher of the gospel.

The Impact of Correlatives of Pluralism

By “correlatives of pluralism” I am referring to a variety of societal trends that are partly causes and partly effects of pluralism. For example, the second one I shall mention, rising biblical illiteracy, contributes to pluralism in that there is a declining percentage of citizens who are so well read, biblically speaking, that they can withstand the negative features of pluralism’s onslaught. They soon become part of the problem. On the other hand, the more philosophical pluralism triumphs in the land, the less incentive there is to read the Bible. In that sense pluralism contributes to biblical illiteracy. Most of the “correlatives of pluralism,” as I have called them, that I am about to introduce, have this kind of dual relation with one form or another of pluralism. My concern here is not to give a rich account of them, still less to analyze their relationships with pluralism, but to identify them briefly, and then reflect on their impact on the preaching of the gospel.

¹¹ R. J. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

¹² “Educating for Moral Values in a Pluralistic Society,” *GOTR* 29 (1984) 393–99.

¹³ See especially C. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991).

1. *Secularization*

Most social scientists do not think of secularization as the societal trends that tend toward the abolition of religion, but as the societal trends that tend toward the marginalization of religion. It has been repeatedly shown that the percentage of Americans who attend religious service at least once a month (or who at least say they do!) has been remarkably stable for most of the century. Variations occur, of course, but they are relatively small. But studies in the processes of secularization do not focus only on such brute statistics as the number of those who attend church services now and then, but also on the way religious commitment bears, or does not bear, on all of human life.

What such studies show is that millions of Americans are religious in certain ways, but that fact has precious little bearing on anything they really judge important in their life. Another way to get at this subject is to evaluate the national discourse. A century and a half ago it was impossible to engage for long in political or historical study without bringing up the subject of Providence. It was important for thinking people to try to understand what God himself was saying in history, whether he was speaking the language of blessing or of judgment. Today, there is not a history department in the land that would approve a Ph.D. dissertation that tried to infer anything at all about providence. Fewer than six decades ago, President F. D. Roosevelt, at the height of the Great Depression, could tell his fellow Americans, in one of his radio fireside chats, "Our problems, thank God, are only material." It is impossible to imagine any of the last half-dozen presidents saying anything similar. The national discourse is taken up with economics, politics, entertainment figures, sports and sports heroes, crime, corruption, disasters, weather, international affairs (at least when they are seen to have a bearing on the US)—but nothing about God, very little about religion, not even very much about such concepts as truth, courtesy, civility, honor, duty, moral courage—all of which sound vaguely quaint and old-fashioned in our ears. The powers of secularization stalk the land.

The bearing of all this on the preacher of the gospel is obvious. We must not only declare the whole counsel of God, but do so in an environment where the subject is perceived to be vaguely irrelevant. In fact, if you seem too passionate about it, *you* may appear to be vaguely irrelevant. To bridge this gap, many preachers succumb to the temptation to become entertainers (for entertainment is one of the categories people *do* understand), or to the temptation to transmute the gospel into something that helps us in our perceived inadequacies (for endless self-focus certainly dominates the national discourse). Other preachers, more robust, dig in and condemn, and gather a group of like-minded conservatives around them, but make little impact on the land. What shall we do?

2. *Rising Biblical Illiteracy*

In 1950 the Gallup organization asked the question, "Did you receive any religious instruction in your youth? Only 6% of Americans answered negatively. When the same question was put to people in 1989, the figure had risen to 38%.

Many of us are so cocooned in our confessional churches, or we live in such relatively conservative parts of the country, that we really do not have any idea how serious this challenge has become. Less than two years ago I gave a series of evangelistic talks to a small group of scientists near Chicago. I went in expecting that two-thirds of them would not even know that the Bible has two Testaments. I discovered that my estimate was a trifle low. Some churches that draw significant numbers of university students take time, whenever they have a special service geared specifically to the outside, to explain what prayer is, before public prayer is offered: many of those who attend have never prayed, or witnessed prayer. A few months ago I was on a television set for a couple of days, working on two or three religious programs sponsored by The Learning Channel and *U.S. News and World Report*. I shared my faith, in some detail, with three people; I probably chatted with thirty others. I found only two who knew the Bible had two Testaments—and these two people had found out only during the previous few weeks, while working on the programs at hand.

In many parts of the country, we cannot assume any biblical knowledge on the part of our hearers at all. The most elementary biblical narratives are completely unknown. In a fifth grade class of thirty students, not far from our home, the teacher asked if anyone knew who Moses was. Only one child could any *anything* about him. On another occasion in the same class, the word "sin" came up, and one child asked what the word meant. In some adult circles, if a biblical narrative is recognized at all, it is because they have seen an epic film—Charleton Heston playing Moses, perhaps. Didn't he have something to do with the ten commandments?

The relevance of these findings out to be obvious. If we preach outside the conservative enclaves in the country, we are often facing astonishing ignorance.

3. *New Age Theosophy*

So many books and articles have appeared in recent years describing one facet or another of the new age movement that I need not describe it afresh. This highly heterogeneous movement has certain features in common. Most visions of "god" in the movement are pantheistic. The aim is not to be reconciled to a transcendent God who has made us and against whom we have rebelled, but to grow in self-awareness and

self-fulfillment, to become self-actualized, to grow to our full potential, until we are rather more at one with the god/universe than we otherwise would be. The focus, in short, is self; evil is reduced, and any notion of judgment imposed by a personal/transcendent God whose wrath has been and will be displayed, is utterly repugnant. Needless to say, there is no need for a mediator, let alone a suffering priest who takes our sin on himself.

There are at least two important implications for the preacher of the gospel. The first is that a person who is largely biblically illiterate but who has absorbed substantial doses of new age theosophy will hear us to be saying things we do not really mean. If we talk about God, Spirit, new birth, power, abundant life, peace, joy, love, family life, conscience, faith, trust, and a host of other topics, they will all be nicely slotted into a new age framework. Even words like “sin” will be read as “bad things” or perhaps “bad karma”—but not at all as something whose badness derives from its offensiveness to the God who has made us and to whom we must give an account. The entire structure of thought of such a person guarantees that he or she will hear us quite differently from what we intend to say, what we think we are saying. “Sin” is a snicker word—that is, it conveys nothing of odium, but makes people snicker. Millions of men and women fornicate without the slightest qualms of conscience. If you find it hard to credit what I am saying it is because you have done too little preaching among frankly secular, biblically illiterate, new age Americans.

The second implication is that many ostensible believers inside our churches—some of whom are genuine believers and some of whom are not—have inevitably picked up some of the surrounding chatter and, being poorly grounded in Scripture and theology, have incorporated into their understanding of Christianity some frankly incompatible elements. Remarkably smarmy notions of “spirituality” abound; very few ask, for instance, what a “spiritual” life looks like *according to the NT documents*.¹⁴ In this framework there is going on, as Tinker puts it, a battle for the mind,¹⁵ even though many have not perceived the nature of the fight.

4. *Vague but Emphatic Appeals to the Cosmic Christ*

The person who is usually credited with the expression “cosmic Christ,” as it has come to be deployed in international theological circles, is Professor J. Sittler, then of the Chicago Divinity School, in his 1961

¹⁴ See my article, “When is Spirituality Spiritual? Reflections on Some Problems of Definition” *JETS* 37.3 (1994) 381–94.

¹⁵ M. Tinker, “Battle for the Mind,” *Churchman* 106 (1992) 34–44.

address to the third Assembly of the WCC at New Delhi.¹⁶ Building on Col 1:15–20, where the word “all” is used six times, Sittler assigned the “all” maximum scope, insisting that God’s redemption is “cosmic in scope,” and that the Christ envisaged there is the “cosmic Christ.” From this lead, a number of writers have used the same expression in progressively complex ways. For example, Panikkar defends the view that “Christ” is found not only in the historical Jesus, but also in certain strands of Hindu thought.¹⁷ One can find not dissimilar notions in H. Küng, K. Rahner, M. M. Thomas, and many others.

More conservative exegetes have often pointed out that to base such views on the Bible it is necessary to pick and choose the texts of the Bible, and then interpret them outside their context. This is of course a form of deconstruction. No less disastrously, “Christ” is so divorced from the historical Jesus that the term can be given almost any content one wishes—though certainly no NT writers had any such disjunction in mind. Thus what texts are interpreted to say is *intentionally* distanced from authorial intent.

Whatever the problems inherent in such views, they are widespread in mainline denominations. Where our ministry touches men and women from such backgrounds, or includes students enrolled in religious studies programs in many universities, it is imperative that the preacher know his audience well enough to address the distortion of the biblical portrait of the Lord Jesus Christ.

5. *The Sheer Pragmatism of the Baby Busters*

The number of books and papers differentiating between “baby boomers” (people born between roughly 1945 and 1960) and “baby busters” (people born between 1960 and 1975) is now legion. One of the most useful surveys is a fairly recent article in *The Atlantic Monthly*.¹⁸ Baby busters do not want to be lectured; they expect to be entertained. They prefer videos to books; many of them have not learned to think in a linear fashion; they put more store than they recognize in mere impressions. As a result, they can live with all sorts of logical inconsistencies and be totally unaware of them. (How many

¹⁶ For a useful summary of the development of the expression, and a telling critique, see S. Sumithra, “Conversion: To Cosmic Christ?” *ERT* 16 (1992) 385–97.

¹⁷ R. Panikkar, “The Meaning of Christ’s Name,” *Service and Salvation*, ed. J. Pathrapankel (Bangalore: C.M.I., 1973), 242ff. Cf. also his 1964 book, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981). Panikkar exegetes a passage from the Hindu Scriptures, *Janmadi Yasyatah*, which on his reading speaks of the cause, power, and goal of all things, but leaves this cause/power/goal unnamed. Panikkar names it “Christ.”

¹⁸ N. Howe and W. Strauss, “The New Generation Gap,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (December 1992) 67–89.

times have I tried to explain to a university-age young person who has made some profession of faith that it is fundamentally inconsistent to claim to know and love the God of the Bible, while being shackled up with someone? They can *see* they are doing what the Bible forbids, but when you press them to articulate the contradiction they scuttle into inconsistency without embarrassment.) They are cynical, not idealistic. They vehemently deny the existence of absolutes: that is their one absolute. Many have never *experienced* principled morality in the home. They have been brought up without a coherent vision or value system, and they have embraced pragmatism with a vengeance. Many of them are furious with the preceding generation (that's me and my generation) for being so crassly materialistic that they have ruined the economy and dumped a tax load onto their shoulders. On the other hand, they are no less materialistic themselves, and will vote for any candidate who promises to deliver more goodies while lowering taxes—precisely the same greedy stupidity that afflicted the generation they condemn. Pluralism is so much their creed that even when the strongest arguments are arrayed to explain, on biblical presuppositions, why morally “good” people should be rejected by the Christian God and assigned to hell, their hearts so rule their heads that very frequently no amount of argumentation is adequate.

It does not take a great deal of imagination to see how people with such positions as these will have an enormous impact on the way the gospel is perceived, if it is preached in strictly traditional categories. The solution of some is to design what are in effect baby buster churches, or at least baby buster church services.¹⁹ The problem, of course, is that unless the various components in the culture of baby busters are analyzed biblically and theologically, we will not know what elements we must confront and reform, what elements are morally neutral, and what elements should be commended and strengthened. But unless we engage in such reflection, we will either remain insensitive to the changing face of American culture (and thus serve only those churches that are found in very conservative parts of the country, or those churches with an aging population), or we will capsize to merely pragmatic considerations ourselves, and build so-called churches with a lot of happy baby busters and very few genuine converts pursuing the knowledge of God and growth in genuine holiness and service.

¹⁹ Eg., L. Anderson, *Dying for Change: An Arresting Look at the New Realities Confronting Church and Para-Church Ministries* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1990).

6. *The Hegemony of Pop Culture*

I do not want to succumb to the elitism that makes sharp distinctions between popular and high culture.²⁰ Nor can I quite bring myself to believe that the medium of television is so bad, intrinsically speaking, that even if all the programs were Christian the medium itself is beyond redemption: so McLuhan, Ellul, and many others.²¹ Granted, a great deal of what appears on television is rubbish; granted, this medium, deployed in an undisciplined way, can take over families, squash conversation, fertilize couch potatoes, discourage serious reading and thought, and pamper my desire to be entertained; granted, much that evangelicalism has attempted to do on television is theologically pathetic;²² granted, a culture addicted to the visual presentation of data presents peculiar challenges to the proclamation of a God who is not only invisible, but who insists that the desire for visual security and certainty is one of the hallmarks of idolatry.²³ Still, I think that one of the most fundamental problems is want of discipline. Homes that severely restrict viewing hours, insist on family reading, encourage debate on good books, talk about the quality and the morality of television programs they do see, rarely or never allow children to watch television without an adult being present (in other words, refusing to let the TV become an unpaid nanny), and generally develop a host of other interests, are not likely to be greatly contaminated by the medium, while still enjoying its numerous benefits. But what will produce such families?

The sad fact is that unless families have a tremendously strong moral base, they will not perceive the dangers in the popular culture; or, if they perceive them, they will not have the stamina to oppose them. There is little point in preachers disgorging all the sad statistics about how many hours of television the average American watches per week, or how many murders a child has witnessed on television by the age of six, or how a teenager has failed to think linearly because of the twenty thousand hours of flickering images he or she has watched, unless the preacher, by the grace of God, is establishing a radically different lifestyle, and serving as a vehicle of grace to enable the people

²⁰ See, for example the telling review of K. A. Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Westchester: Crossway, 1989), written by W. Edgar and published in *WJT* 53 (1991) 377-80.

²¹ See, most recently, S. Vibert, "The Word in an Audio-Visual Age: Can We Still Preach the Gospel?" *Churchman* 106 (1992) 147-58.

²² See especially Q. J. Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

²³ See Vibert, 147-58.

in his congregation to pursue it with determination, joy, and a sense of adventuresome, God-pleasing freedom.

Meanwhile, the harsh reality is that most Americans, including most of those in our churches, have so been shaped by the popular culture that no thoughtful preacher can afford to ignore the impact. The combination of music and visual presentation, often highly suggestive, is no longer novel. Casual sexual liaisons are everywhere, not least in many of our churches, often with little shame. "Get even" is a common dramatic theme. Strength is commonly confused with lawless brutality. Most advertising titillates our sin of covetousness. This is the air we breathe; this is our culture. How shall we address it?

7. *The Multiplication of Single-Issue Believers*

One of the difficult components in the current fragmentation of evangelicalism is the movement away from the centrality of the gospel and toward one of a dozen or more "in" causes. It is not that the gospel is being overtly denied. Rather, the gospel is mildly assumed, but excites few passions among contemporary evangelicals. What excites passions and commands allegiance, energy, publications, and commitment, is one or another of the current "hot button" topics: abortion, women's ordination (for or against), home schooling, school prayer, concerts of prayer, social involvement in inner-city programs, denominational power struggles, forms of worship, debates over prophecy and healing, and so on. Not for a moment am I suggesting that Christians should *not* be working in these and many other areas. What I fear, however, is the detachment of these causes from the gospel, or worse, the displacement of the gospel by one or more of these causes.

Historically, many Christians have led the fight for various social reforms. Many of the men and women converted under the ministries of Harris, Whitefield, and the Wesleys were the ones who spearheaded the introduction of trade unions, legal measures to prohibit child labor in the mines, radical prison reform, reform in education, the abolition of slavery, and much more. But the best of these leaders did so *out of the matrix of the gospel*. In other words, they were passionate for the gospel first, and out of that framework saw their wider responsibilities and discharged them faithfully. Unless I am mistaken, many modern Christians who become deeply involved with one or more of the issues I have listed focus so narrowly on their particular issue that the gospel itself, while never denied, is *de facto* of minor importance.

For the preacher of the gospel, this means that there is a queue of people eager to assess you, *not* on the basis of your faithful articulation of the gospel and its entailments, but on how frequently you bang their particular drum. Bang it often, and you're a good chap; neglect it, and

you demonstrate your unforgivable inability to perceive what is of transcendental importance about their particular issue.

What preacher has not felt this kind of pressure?

Final Reflections

I conclude. There are numerous dimensions in American culture I have not even introduced. For example, I have not asked how various groups of African-Americans hear the gospel, or how young immigrant Chinese hear it, or how educated white women from Ivy League universities hear it, or how white, blue-collar males hear it. Moreover, I must hasten to make clear that quite different though complementary analyses are possible. For instance, in one of his books Dyrness asks, "How does America hear the Gospel?"²⁴ and focuses on the white American middle class. Dyrness thinks his way through three complexes of values that are, for this group, quintessentially American: (1) pragmatism, an essentially materialist basis; (2) hope or optimism; (3) rugged individualism. In each instance Dyrness tries to analyze the strength and weakness, biblically speaking, of these components of culture. Whatever the merits of his analysis, Dyrness is trying to encourage reflection on how the gospel is heard. And that is a question of paramount importance.

All that I have said today has been pretty negative. Had I time, I would paint a still more negative picture, for we must grasp that the Christ-rejecting societal trends I have briefly outlined are, from a biblical perspective, tied to the deceptive power of the devil himself. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against supernatural power, even in heavenly places.

Small wonder that gospel victory, in any culture as in any life, depends, ultimately, on the grace of God. But that truth does not absolve us of the responsibility to be wise, discerning, and faithful heralds of the gospel. My second lecture, then, will suggest some strategies and priorities for preachers who want to proclaim the gospel in our culture faithfully and, by God's grace, fruitfully.

²⁴ W. A. Dyrness, *How Does America Hear the Gospel?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).