

THE CHALLENGE FROM THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL TO PLURALISM*

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In my first lecture I outlined some of the challenges addressed by contemporary forms of pluralism to the preaching of the gospel. Now I want to change direction, and suggest some ways that contemporary preaching of the gospel should respond to that challenge, and offer some fundamental challenges of its own.

Not long before he died, M. Warren wrote:¹

Reacting, and reacting rightly, against the dogmatic triumphalism of much past Christian approach to men of other faiths, it is all too easy to swing to the other extreme and talk happily of different roads to the summit, as if Jesus were in no particular and distinctive sense “the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” Of course where this point is reached, the Great Commission is tacitly, if not explicitly, held to be indefinitely in suspense if not quite otiose. This is a view forcefully propounded by some Christians holding professorial Chairs in Britain and across the Atlantic. Are they right? Is courtesy always to preclude contradiction? Is choice now just a matter of taste, no longer a response to an absolute demand? Is the Cross on Calvary really no more than a confusing roundabout sign pointing in every direction, or is it still the place where *all* men are meant to kneel?

It will come as no surprise to you that Warren’s last question I answer with a wholehearted “Yes!” But in that case it is important to think

* This is the second of two lectures read for the annual Criswell Theological Lectures, February, 1994. This material has been expanded and further developed in the author’s *The Gaggling of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

¹ Max A. C. Warren, *I Believe in the Great Commission* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1976) 150–51.

through what form a faithful and wise articulation of this exclusive gospel will take as it confronts postmodern perils. In this brief lecture, perhaps I may venture six points.

I. *We must develop an array of responses to the new hermeneutic and to deconstruction*

The severity of the challenge becomes clear when we picture two quite different Christian apologists approaching a thoughtful deconstructionist. The first Christian is an evidentialist. She may begin by marshalling various arguments for the existence of God, and proceed to demonstrate that the only adequate explanation of the biblical accounts of the resurrection of Jesus and of the change in his disciples is that Jesus in fact did rise from the dead. The deconstructionist listens with interest, but can find other explanations for the early belief in Jesus' resurrection. More importantly, he insists that his Christian interlocutor's passion to convert him is itself a function of the rather closed and old-fashioned society from which she hails. He is courteous, but unimpressed.

The second Christian apologist is one form of fideist, or presuppositionalist. He has a name, partly because I cannot improve on the testimony of this man. J. Cooper² was a philosophy major at Calvin College in the 1960s. There he learned to attack the alleged autonomy, neutrality, and vaunted self-sufficiency of all human reasoning. The aim was to hoist modernists with their own petard. This approach is fundamental to A. Kuyper's discernment of antithesis in science, to H. Dooyeweerd's transcendental critique of theoretical thought, to Van Til's presuppositionalism, and even to the Reformed foundationalism of A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff. Eventually, however, Cooper began doctoral study under P. Ricoeur at the University of Toronto. The story may be continued in his own words:³

Gathering courage [at a Ricoeur seminar on hermeneutics], I trotted out my best Reformed arguments that reason and knowledge are not neutral but dependent upon basic commitments, presuppositions, and perspectives. I was ready for a fight, but everyone just stared at me as though I had announced that the Pope is Catholic. "Yes, yes . . . go on," Ricoeur encouraged, interested in the validation of presuppositions. But I had nothing left except a personal testimony about my religious beliefs. My best Reformed philosophical arguments were mere truisms to these people. I'll never forget the consternation I felt.

² John W. Cooper, "Reformed Apologetics and the Challenge of Post-Modern Relativism," *CTJ* 28 (1993) 108–20, esp. 108–9.

³ Cooper, 109.

Times are changing. Modernism is dying, though its strength is not completely spent. By now the announcement of a new outlook, something called “post-modernism,” has become a cliché. . . . At the heart of the new mood are principled pluralism and radical relativism.

This does not mean that evidentialism has nothing useful to say, or that a Reformed apologetic is entirely invalid. I will not attempt to arbitrate on that ancient debate here, except peripherally. It does mean, however, that “standard” approaches to apologetics simply do not touch the intelligent, committed deconstructionist.

Among the responses I have found useful are the following five.

1. *Acknowledge some truth in the new hermeneutic, some validity in deconstruction*

There is of course irony in acknowledging (objective) truth in the new hermeneutic, but it will almost certainly bypass the person to whom you are speaking. In any case, your acknowledgment is not a cheap, psychological ploy to bring the other person “on side,” a mere courtesy perhaps: it is, rather, an *important* obligation, for there are in fact *important* things to learn.

All of us see things only in part, and never without some measure of distortion. To say this is not (I shall shortly argue) to succumb to absolute relativism. It is, rather, to admit a truth that many have recognized, but which has become clearer owing not least to our experience of empirical pluralism. Each of us is finite; none of us displays the attribute of omniscience. Our beliefs are shaped in part by our culture, language, heritage, and community.

Of course, this is one of the reasons why the subject of contextualization has become ubiquitous in recent years. It has long been recognized that new churches, to become mature, must become self-governing, self-financing, and self-propagating: those were the measures of the old indigenous principle. Contextualization takes a big step further. It insists that believers must “do theology” from within their own culture, and not simply learn a system of theology developed in another culture. For most of us, I think, this has become almost axiomatic. We are aware of the abuses to which certain forms of contextualization can lead, and about which I will say more in a moment, but we cannot reasonably doubt the importance of the phenomenon.

To take some easy examples: Believers in sub-Saharan Black Africa are likely to be less individualistic than their Western counterparts, to avoid deep dichotomies between the natural world and the spiritual world, and to think of death without the taboos that our culture places on it. These three cultural factors alone will have various influences on their theology, as they develop it from studying the Bible. They will likely find in Paul more corporate metaphors for the church than we

do, and prove quicker at living them out. They will have less trouble with a comprehensive doctrine of providence, and will talk about death more frankly. Living as many Africans do in a still profoundly oral culture, they often prove more able to read and preach narrative parts of Scripture sensitively and tellingly; correspondingly, their ability to handle discourse is not impressive. Most westerners have inverse strengths and weaknesses. It is not surprising, then, that we shall develop our respective theologies along somewhat different lines. If the new hermeneutic helps us along the path of humility, that is surely a good thing.

Indeed, in certain respects believers can embrace pluralism more lavishly than the secularists can. Our heavenly Father created a wonderfully diverse world: let us adore him for it.⁴ He makes each snowflake different; we make ice-cubes. Quite clearly, God likes diversity in the color of human skin—he has made people wonderfully diverse. Similarly, apart from the wretched sinfulness endemic to all cultures, one must assume that God likes cultural diversity as well. In the realm of knowing, we join the experts of deconstruction and of the new hermeneutic in insisting on human finiteness; more, we go further and insist on human sinfulness. The noetic effects of sin are so severe that we culpably distort the data brought to us by our senses to make it fit into self-serving grids. We are not only finite, on many fronts we are blind.

Moreover, we need to insist that *all* topics we deal with are *necessarily* culture-laden. Language itself is a feature of culture, and there are few topics we can examine very far without resorting to language. I simply cannot escape my cultural locatedness. Recognizing the need to preserve absolutes, yet perceiving the overarching and frankly relativizing influence of culture, some Christians have sought to escape the problem by suggesting that some core of basic Christian truths transcends culture. Take, for instance, the work of C. Kraft⁵—an example I have developed more fully elsewhere.⁶ Kraft thinks of the Bible as a case-book. The wise pastor or missionary applies the appropriate case to the culture at hand. Thus, in a society that is polygamous (his example), it might be wise to begin with OT polygamy, perhaps with David and Solomon and their many wives, rather than with the mo-

⁴ See some of the opening remarks by Jonathan F. Frothe, "Confessing Christ in a Pluralistic Age," *Concordia Journal* 16 (1990) 217–30.

⁵ In particular, his *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1980).

⁶ D. A. Carson, "Church and Mission: Reflections on Contextualization and the Third Horizon," *The Church in the Bible and the World*, ed. D. A. Carson (Exeter: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 213–57, esp. 242ff.

nogamous ideal set out in the NT. When pressed to articulate what, if any, fundamental truths Christianity embraces that must be pressed on every culture, Kraft suggests there is a handful of non-negotiable, transcultural truths, such as “Jesus is Lord.”

But Kraft, I think, has not gone far enough, and too far. He has not gone far enough in that even so basic a confession as “Jesus is Lord” cannot escape culture. For a start, it is in English. Moreover, we English-speaking Western Christians adopt common assumptions about the referent of the word “Jesus” (though Jehovah’s Witnesses might not agree), and probably want to define “Lord” as well. For example, the instructed Christian will remember that “Lord” is often used in the Septuagint to refer to YHWH, and suspect that the confession “Jesus is Lord” includes not-very-subtle hints of Jesus’ deity. Not all who take the confession on their lips will be saying so much; they will not be adequately instructed. But the problem is still more complex. If the confession were translated into Thai and uttered in a Buddhist Temple, it would probably be understood to imply that Jesus is inferior to Gautama the Buddha. This is because in Buddhist thought the highest state of exaltation is reached when nothing at all can be predicated about the person: the most exalted individual is neither hot nor cold, good nor bad, and so on. To predicate that Jesus is Lord, therefore, is to imply that Jesus is inferior to Gautama the Buddha, about whom nothing can be predicated. Thus not even “Jesus is Lord” can escape the grasp of culture. A similar analysis could be undertaken for any other fundamental truth that Kraft or anyone else advances as something that transcends all cultures. If truth can transcend culture (and I shall argue that in certain respects it does), it does not do so in any simple way. In this sense, Kraft does not go far enough.

But in another sense, Kraft goes much too far. If we can establish that truth can be objective and transcendent *even though it is necessarily expressed in culture-laden ways and believed or known by finite, culturally-restricted people*—a perspective I shall briefly develop in a few moments—then if the proposition “Jesus is Lord” can be judged absolute, even though it is expressed in culture-laden terms, there is nothing intrinsically inappropriate about the conclusion that countless other propositions may also be absolute, even though each of them is culture-laden.

This may become clearer if we analyze a little further what we mean by saying that “Jesus is Lord” is part of the culture-transcending heritage of the church everywhere. I think I mean something like this: The semantic context of “Jesus is Lord” as expressed and understood by an English-speaking believer who has at least some rudimentary knowledge of the Bible and Christian theology must be grasped and

believed by men and women everywhere in every culture, however it is expressed and articulated within each culture. Of course, there are all sorts of ambiguities about this way of wording things. But my point is that if linguistics has taught us anything, it has taught us that whatever can be said in one language can be said in another, even if not in the same way and brevity. What I as a Western believer mean by "Jesus is Lord" can be conveyed in Thai, to a Thai Buddhist. But it will not be conveyed, in the first instance, by a mere slogan. Christian understanding of the confession is dependent upon an entire worldview that takes in a personal/transcendent God, the revelation of the Scripture, understanding of who Jesus is, and so on. The initial Thai *misunderstanding* turns on another entire worldview: an essentially pantheistic view of God, radically different understanding of revelation, relative or perhaps complete ignorance of Jesus, and so forth. To explain to the Thai what I mean by "Jesus is Lord" can be done, but not easily, not quickly, and not with mere slogans. Once there is a confessional Thai church, of course, the cultural barriers inherent in all Christian witness may be crossed more quickly.

I have not set up English as the necessary medium by which all other expressions of "Jesus is Lord" are to be tested. That would be the rankest cultural imperialism. I have used English in my example merely to personalize my argument. All I am saying is that if there is an objective standard of truth out there, the ways in which we confess it will vary enormously from culture to culture. Of course, all of this presupposes that there is some sense to the notion of objective truth in the first place, but I will press that point in a moment.

My first point, then, is that Christians have a vested interest in acknowledging where the new hermeneutic and deconstruction say important and true things. Moreover, by acknowledging these things we may gain a hearing among some who would otherwise shut us out.

2. *It is vital to see that some deconstructionists slant the debate by appealing to indefensible antitheses*

They are inclined to do this in one of two ways.

First, they may offer *either* absolute knowledge *or* complete relativism. The criterion is made rigid and extreme. As Juhl puts it, "Is this one of those cases in which an absolute demand has been imposed on a concept, in this case the concept of meaning, such that by its very nature our language is incapable of satisfying the demand?"⁷

⁷ P. D. Juhl, "Playing with Texts: Can Deconstruction Account for Critical Practice?" *Criticism and Critical Theory*, ed. Jeremy Hawthorn (London: Edward Arnold, 1984) 61.

An example of the difficulties inherent in language is commonly drawn from Archie Bunker. His wife asks him if he wants his bowling shoes laced over or under. He offhandedly replies, "What's the difference?" So she tries to explain, in great detail, while the audience is howling with laughter because we perceive that what he means by "What's the difference?" is not "I do not understand the difference and would like you to explain it to me," but simply "I don't give a damn." Yet from this simple example the deconstructionist P. de Man, through complex reasoning, finally concludes, "Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration."⁸ One wants to say, "Give me a break." Archie's wife may not have understood the possibility of a double meaning, but the audience does, or it would not laugh. How does one responsibly move from a simple ambiguity, created for the sake of a joke and instantly understood by a laughing audience, to "vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration"? We are being manipulated by a rigid and unacceptable antithesis.

Second, some deconstructionists lace their arguments with manipulative emotional appeals. Thus Derrida, in one of his much-quoted essays,⁹ contrasts two interpretations of interpretation. The first is the "Rousseauist" version, which is "sad, negative, nostalgic, and guilty" and "which is always turned towards the presence, lost or impossible, of the absent origin." The other is the Nietzschean version, "the joyous affirmation of the freeplay of the world, and without truth, without origin." As I. Wright comments, the sole purpose of such passages is "to stigmatize origin-oriented hermeneutics [that is, a system of interpretation that insists there must be some connection between text and authorial intent] as fuddy-duddy."¹⁰ It is very hard to avoid the impression that this shout of praise is in behalf of solipsism and intellectual nihilism.

3. There are some models of approaching texts that glean the best from the new hermeneutic, but do not destroy all possibility of absolute truth

In other words, there are models that allow for the valid insights of the new hermeneutic and of deconstruction without falling off the end into the extreme relativism that characterizes many of its proponents. Gadamer spoke of *Horizontsentfremdung* and *Horizontverschmelzung*,

⁸ Cited by Juhl, 62-63.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donado, ed., *The Structuralist Controversy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970) 264.

¹⁰ Iain Wright, "History, Hermeneutics, Deconstruction," *Criticism and Critical Theory*, ed. Jeremy Hawthorn (London: Edward Arnold, 1984) 87.

expressions that have come to be rendered by “distanciation” and “fusion of horizons.” The idea is that if all the cultural “baggage” of a text is likened to one horizon, and all the cultural “baggage” of a reader is likened to another horizon, it is possible for the reader progressively to distance himself from his own horizon as he reads himself into the text, and thus finally so to “fuse” his own horizon of understanding with that of the text so that some accurate transfer of information is possible, even if never perfect. A less complicated model is the hermeneutical spiral (the title of a recent book).¹¹ Instead of going round and round an endless hermeneutical circle, one can as it were “spiral in” on the truth, as one asks better questions of a text, and hears more accurate answers. A mathematical example I have sometimes used is the asymptote. A curved line may approach a straight line asymptotically, never quite touching it but always getting closer—so close, in fact, that all of differential and integral calculus depends upon such models of closeness.

The point of all such models is that although none of us ever knows any complicated thing exhaustively, we can know some things truly. Our confidence in what we know may not enjoy the certainty of omniscience, but it is not necessarily condemned to futility. Even a child may believe and understand the truth of the proposition “God loves the world,” even when the child’s knowledge of God, love, and the world is minimal, and her grasp of Johannine theology still less (John 3:16). With patient study and increased learning and rising experience, a believer may come to understand a great deal more about the proposition “God loves the world” than does the child. But would it be correct to say that the child *misunderstands* the proposition? The proposition as John gave it, I would argue, is absolutely true; as grasped by the child, it is truly understood, even if not exhaustively understood.

4. Practical experience with the way people actually communicate confirms that accurate communication is possible

I sometimes tell the story of how a few years ago I was teaching an evening course on hermeneutics, a course jointly offered by several of the seminaries in the Chicago area. Not very successfully, I was trying to set out both what could be learned from the new hermeneutic, and where the discipline was likely to lead one astray. In particular, I was insisting that true knowledge is possible, even to finite, culture-bound creatures. A doctoral student from another seminary waited patiently through two or three hours of lectures, and then quietly protested that she did not think I was escaping from the dreaded positiv-

¹¹ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992).

ism of the nineteenth century. Deeper appreciation for the ambiguities of language, the limits of our understanding, the uniqueness of each individual and the social nature of knowledge would surely drive me to a more positive assessment of the new hermeneutic. I tried to defend my position, but I was quite unable to persuade her.

Finally, in a moment of sheer perversity on my part, I joyfully exclaimed, "Ah, now I think I see what you are saying. You are using delicious irony to affirm the objectivity of truth." The lady was not amused. "That is exactly what I am *not* saying," she protested with some heat, and she laid out her position again. I clasped my hands in enthusiasm and told her how delighted I was to find someone using irony so cleverly in order to affirm the possibility of objective knowledge. Her answer was more heated, but along the same lines as her first reply. I believe she also accused me of twisting what she was saying. I told her I thought it was marvelous that she should add emotion to her irony, all to the purpose of exposing the futility of extreme relativism, thereby affirming truth's objectivity. Not surprisingly, she exploded in real anger, and accused me of a lot of unmentionable things.

When she finally cooled down, I said, rather quietly, "But this is how I am reading you."

Of course, she saw what I was getting at immediately, and sputtered out like a spent candle. She simply did not know what to say. In one sense, of course, my example was artificial, since I only pretended to read her in a certain way. But what I did was sufficient to prove the point I was trying to make to her: "You are a deconstructionist," I told her, "but you expect me to interpret *your* words aright. More precisely, you are upset because I seem to be divorcing the meaning I claim to see in your words from your intent. Thus, implicitly you affirm the link between text and authorial intent. I have never read a deconstructionist who would be pleased if a reviewer misinterpreted his or her work: thus *in practice* deconstructionists implicitly link their own texts with their own intentions. I simply want the same courtesy extended to Paul."

My point, then, is that in the real world, for all the difficulties there are in communication from person to person and from culture to culture, we still expect people to say more or less what they mean (and if they do not, we chide them for it), and we expect mature people to understand what others say and represent it fairly. The understanding is doubtless never absolutely exhaustive and perfect, but that does not mean the only alternative is to dissociate text from speaker, and then locate all meaning in the reader or hearer. True knowledge of the meaning of *a text* and even of *the thoughts of the author who wrote it* is possible, even if perfect and exhaustive knowledge is not.

5. *Finally, from a Christian perspective our belief in an omniscient God who accommodates himself to talk in human languages introduces a new and important element*

Doubtless God is transcendent, but he is also personal, a talking God. Nor does he restrict himself to forms of communication that only another omniscient being could comprehend. He chooses to talk in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, a priceless exhibition of “the scandal of historical particularity.” Because he chooses to communicate with finite mortals in their languages, he cannot possibly communicate *all* that he is and knows, but I cannot see how that is a barrier to his communicating some true elements of what he is and knows. Of course, we will misunderstand the communication in all sorts of ways, owing both to our finiteness and to our sinfulness. But the content itself is objectively true, a subset of what Omniscience knows, and cast in culture-laden forms that demand of modern readers that we attempt to fuse the horizon of our own understandings with that of the culture and language in which the deposit was given.¹²

If we are right in this understanding of God and his gracious self-disclosure, then we have additional reasons for speaking of “objective knowledge.”

Now I have barely touched on the fully panoply of responses that might be raised against the worst abuses of deconstruction. Nor am I suggesting that even these brief responses must be advanced on every occasion that we preach the gospel to postmoderns. In every case we must get to know our audience, and assess what is needed. But in our own minds we need to think some of these things through, and decide just how much of this sort of pre-evangelism is necessary and wise. We may at some point judge it necessary to advance all our reasons for thinking that a transcendent talking God actually exists; we may provide historical argumentation for our understanding of the historical reality of Jesus’ resurrection; we may try to demonstrate that other positions display far more internal problems and inconsistencies. We may be talking to people with little education who have nevertheless bought into philosophical pluralism without ever having heard the words. But in any case, we must develop an array of responses to the new hermeneutic and to deconstruction.

II. *In our evangelism, we must start farther back, and nail down the turning points in redemptive history*

Perhaps this point can be established most simply by taking two steps. First, I shall reflect on the example of Paul in Athens; second, I

¹² See D. A. Carson, “Church and Mission,” 213–57, 342–47.

shall insist on the priority, in the present culture, of preaching biblical (as opposed to systematic) theology.

1. *The example of Paul in Athens (Acts 17:16-31)*

Before looking at the text itself, we should remind ourselves that the world confronting the early church was a highly pluralistic world.¹³ The precise shape of the pluralism the church confronted doubtless varied from place to place throughout the Roman Empire, but enough is known about particular sites to give us some idea of what early Christians faced.¹⁴ The imperial cult was becoming increasingly important, with cities vying for the privilege of becoming *neokoros*—that is, being granted permission to build a temple to honor and worship a particular Caesar. A city like Corinth not only had temples in honor of traditional Greek deities such as Apollo and Neptune; it also boasted a sanctuary of the Egyptian gods Isis and Serapis.¹⁵ The many mystery cults entered their own mystical appeals. The goddess Artemis, cherished not only at Ephesus but in other parts as well (e.g., in Patras in northern Peloponnesus), demanded sacrifices in which large numbers of birds and animals were burned to death, the people enraptured by the spectacle and excited by the shrieks. Such sacrifices provided large quantities of meat. The healing gods, the fertility cults, the forms of religion bordering on pantheism—all made their appeals. Despite the fact that some classicists tend to purge the Greco-Roman tradition of all that might be judged ignoble, D. Gill and others have graphically shown that at the popular level the “early church was addressing people who worshipped rocks, believed plants could be deities, had sacred animals, accepted ritual castration and prostitution. In addition there were the cults that we normally associate with the Roman empire, Jupiter and the other Capitoline deities, as well as the cult of the Emperor himself.”¹⁶

¹³ Much of what follows in the next two or three paragraphs is 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 John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 43–45.

¹⁴ See, *inter alia*, Bruce W. Winter, “Theological and Ethical Responses to Religious Pluralism—1 Corinthians 8–10,” *Tyn Bul* 41 (1990) 210–15; David W. J. Gill, “Behind the Classical Façade: Local Religions of the Roman Empire,” *One God One Lord in a World of Religious Pluralism*, ed. Andrew D. Clarke and Bruce W. Winter (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1991) 72–87; Clinton Arnold, *Ephesians: Powers and Magic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Thorsten Moritz, “‘Summing-up All Things’: Religious Pluralism and Universalism in Ephesians,” *One God One Lord*, 88–111; Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, JSNTSS 11 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986).

¹⁵ According to Pausanias 2.4.7.

¹⁶ Gill, “Behind the Classical Façade,” 87.

This enormous potpourri was syncretistic—that is, it was not a conglomeration of mutually exclusive religious groups, each damning all the others. Rather, the opinion of the overwhelming majority was that the competing religions had more or less merit to them. True, many religious adherents judged that their favored brand was best; but probably most saw no problem in participating in many religions. Indeed, the cultural and religious diversity within the Empire, enhanced by the imperial decision to arrange “god-swaps” between the Roman pantheon and the gods favored by newly subjugated peoples, ensured that most religions made few exclusive claims. Jews were viewed as an intransigent exception. Not only could they not show what their God was like, but they were prepared to die to defend their peculiar views. The Empire therefore made a grudging exception in their case, and it extended that exception to Christians as well, at least for as long as the imperial powers thought of Christianity as a sect within Judaism. Admittedly the pluralism of the Roman Empire, unlike the present variety, was not driven by the engines of naturalism (though some thinkers, such as Lucretius, were philosophical naturalists). Even so, the religious world that nascent Christianity confronted was profoundly pluralistic.

At one level, there is great encouragement for us in this fact. On certain points it was probably harder to make a fair application from the NT Scriptures to evangelical Protestantism during the two centuries when Protestantism exercised a gentle hegemony in the land, than it is today. The responses of the NT writers to the pluralism of their day can be applied with relative directness to the analogous pluralism of our day.

Thus, against the claims of other intermediaries, Colossians insists not only on the supremacy of Christ but also on the exclusiveness of his sufficiency. While others recognize many “lords,” many (pagan) baptisms, a wide variety of “hopes” (i.e., diverse visions of the *summum bonum*), Christians recognize one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one hope, and one God (Eph 4:4–6). While some Greek philosophers opined that there was “one god,” this projected deity was almost always portrayed in pantheistic terms (which is one of the prime reasons why many Greek writers could alternate between “god” and “gods” without any apparent difference in meaning). They could speak of “one god” but could not confess that “God is One.” Paul insists that the one God is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of creation and of the old covenant, who has supremely disclosed himself in his Son (Romans 1; 1 Corinthians 8). One cannot read Revelation 2–3 without discerning the titanic struggle the early church faced from the multifaceted pressures of pluralism. Indeed, it is surely safe to conclude that, by and large, the NT writers did not readily distinguish the pluralism

of the day from the idolatry of the day: the destruction of the one was the destruction of the other.

Doubtless the reasons why we today are becoming more pluralistic (in the third, philosophical sense I developed in my previous lecture) are almost all bad. Nevertheless, they bring us into a situation where many NT texts address us with more immediate power than at any time during the last two or three centuries. These passages just cited, and many more, show the early church not so much opposing the *existence* of pluralism (on some philosophical ground), as defying it, insisting on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the exclusiveness of the saving power of his gospel. But they did so in such a way that they showed they understood the people they were addressing. We must develop similar firmness, and similar flexibility.

Now we are ready to outline some of the key elements, according to Luke, of Paul's address in Athens. I shall not attempt a detailed exposition.¹⁷ I merely draw your attention to an apostolic number of points.

(1) Paul's approach, preaching to these people who had never read the OT and had never heard of Moses, was radically different from his approach in, say, the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:13f.), where the burden of his preaching is that Jesus really did fulfill the OT prophecies, rightly understood, and that failure to bow to him would bring down OT promises of judgment. Clearly, such an approach would mean nothing to those who had never heard of the Hebrew Bible, much less read it.

(2) While some might have been mightily impressed by Athenian architecture, sculpture and learning, Paul "was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (17:16). In other words, his reactions were based not on aesthetics, but on a Christian analysis of the culture.

(3) When he is finally brought before the Areopagus, he begins with courtesy, but with remarkable restraint: "I see that in every way you are very religious" (17:22). Courtesy, yes; but there is no approval of their religion as an alternative way of salvation.

(4) Paul finds a way into his subject by referring to the inscription "To an Unknown God" (17:23).¹⁸ Probably such altars reflected the fears of animistic strata in pagan culture. There are powers beyond what one can know, and just to be on the safe side it is important to offer sacrifices to all of them—even to unknown ones. By contrast, Paul

¹⁷ Among the plethora of relevant books and articles that might be cited, one of the more interesting is Khiok-Khng Yeo, "A Rhetorical Study of Acts 17:22-31: What Has Jerusalem To Do with Athens and Beijing?" *Jian Dao* 1 (1994) 75-107.

¹⁸ Although archaeologists have not uncovered such an inscription in the ruins of ancient Athens, Pausanias, a second century traveler, reports that in Athens there are "altars of gods named unknown" (*Description of Greece* 1.1.4).

insists he is introducing the God who is known, the God who has revealed himself.

(5) It has often been pointed out that there are other elements in the surrounding culture that Paul specifically confronts.¹⁹ Acts 17:18 specifically mentions “Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.” In the first century, “philosophy” did not have the fairly esoteric and abstract connotations it has today. It referred to an entire way of life, based on a rigorous and self-consistent intellectual system. The ideal of Epicurean philosophy was an undisturbed life, a life of tranquility, untroubled by undue involvement in human affairs. The gods themselves are composed of atoms so fine they live in calmness in the spaces between the worlds. As the gods are nicely removed from the hurley-burley of life, so human beings should seek the same ideal. But over against this vision, Paul presents a God who is actively involved in this world as its Creator, providential Ruler, Judge, and self-disclosing Savior.

Stoic philosophy thought of god as all-pervasive, more-or-less in a pantheistic sense, so that the human ideal was to live life in line with what is ultimately real, to conduct life in line with this god/principle of reason, which must rule over emotion and passion. Stoicism was “marked by great moral earnestness and a high sense of duty.”²⁰ Against such a vision, the God Paul presents, far from being pantheistic, is personal, distinct from the creation, our final Judge. Instead of focusing on “universal reason tapped into by human reasoning,”²¹ Paul contrasts divine will and sovereignty with human dependence and need.

(6) Specifically, Paul introduces God as separate from the universe. He is the Creator (he “made the world and everything in it,” 17:24), he is sovereign (he “is the Lord of heaven and earth,” 17:24), and he is so transcendent that he cannot be domesticated by human forms of worship (he “does not live in temples built by hands,” 17:24).

(7) Verse 25 is of enormous importance; God “is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.” This passage not only insists that God sustains life and rules providentially, but that he is characterized by aseity. This fine word has largely dropped out of theological discussion, though the truth that God is the God of aseity was once a commonplace. It means that God is so independent that he does not need us. We cannot give him anything he lacks, or wheedle something out of

¹⁹ See, for example, in addition to the major commentaries, John Proctor, “The Gospel from Athens: Paul’s Speech Before the Areopagus and the Evangel for Today,” *Evangel* 10 (1992) 69–72.

²⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Leicester: IVP/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 377.

²¹ This felicitous phrase is Proctor’s, “The Gospel from Athens,” 70.

him by cajoling him: he is God, the God “who is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything.” He is the God who declares, “If I were hungry, I would not tell you” (Ps 50:12).

(8) All of the human race has descended from one man, himself created by God. This means that the one God rules over all, governing all people, their nations and their history (“he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live,” 17:26). Thus, not only is there no room for racism or elitist tribalism, but one of the entailments of monotheism is that if there is one God he must in some sense be God of all, acknowledged or not.

(9) God’s purpose in his ordering of history is to incite human beings to pursue him (17:27). The assumption, in other words, is that they otherwise would not. This hint at human rebellion is then further teased out and expanded: idolatry is a practice both culpably ignorant and evil, and all must one day answer to this Creator-God who is also Judge (17:29–30). None of this means that God is playing hard to get, or that he has hidden himself somewhere and must be discovered by noble feats of exploration: “he is not far from each one of us” (17:28). Paul even allows that such insight is recognized by some pagan poets (17:38).

(10) History is not going around and around in endless cycles, as many Greeks thought. History is teleological; it is pressing on in one direction, to the day of final judgment: God “has set a day when he will judge the world with justice” (17:31). Not only so, but there are developments *within* history; in modern theological parlance, there are salvation-historical or redemptive-historical developments. History is constrained not only by creation at one end and judgment at the other, but by singularities. In particular, God has largely overlooked the pagan nations of the world *until this point*, but “*now* he commands all people everywhere to repent” (17:30).

(11) Although it is none less than God himself who will judge on the last day (17:31a), he will do so through a particular man, a man accredited by the brute historical fact that God raised him from the dead. We need to observe three things. First, only at this point, after he has set out an entire worldview and even something of a philosophy of history, does Paul introduce Jesus. Second, so far as the record goes, Paul refers to Jesus’ miraculous resurrection without mentioning either his divine status or his atoning death. Probably he was about to do so; the narrative gives the impression that at this point Paul is cut off before he can complete his address. Third, not only does the picture Paul paints contradict animism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism, but by so boldly introducing physical resurrection ascribed to God himself Paul is directly taking on one of the commonplaces in a great deal of Greek thought, namely neo-Platonic dualism. The spiritual is good; the physical

world is bad. It is inconceivable that God, who is by definition good, would raise someone up to physical life, which is at least relatively bad. That is the very point that causes some to sneer (v 32). But Paul does not flinch: his insistence on the resurrection of Jesus, as reported here by Luke, is entirely in line with what Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians: “if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (1 Cor 15:14).

(12) Finally, whereas we can read this record of Paul’s address in two or three minutes, doubtless he himself took an hour or two or more. We have only the skimpiest record. But what we have is crucial, as we try to think through what themes need to be articulated and stressed as we preach the gospel to modern pagans.

2. *The primacy of biblical theology*

At the risk of oversimplification, most evangelistic tools in the Western world are subsets of systematic theology. By this I mean that they tend to ask atemporal questions, and give atemporal answers: What is God like? What is at the heart of human need? What is sin? What is God’s provision? How do we receive it? And so forth. This assessment, I think, is almost as true of, say, John Stott’s *Basic Christianity* as it is of the Four Spiritual Laws or of the five points of Evangelism Explosion.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this pattern, as long as most of the people to whom it is presented have already bought into the Judeo-Christian heritage. A generation ago, the overwhelming majority of Americans enjoyed at least some knowledge of the pattern “creation/fall/ten commandments/Christ/judgment.” Many had no real idea why Jesus died; virtually all believed that sin is an offense against God, who holds us accountable. But if you present these atemporal outlines of the gospel to those who know nothing about the Bible’s plot-line, and who have bought into one form or another of new age theosophy, how will they hear you? “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life”: Is this the god of Shirley MacLaine? Of course he/she/it loves me: I’m lovable, aren’t I? And this wonderful life: will I be wealthy? happy? Will I have wonderful kids? wonderful sex? a lot of respect? What do I have to do to get this wonderful life?

In short, the good news of Jesus Christ is virtually incoherent unless it is securely set into the framework of the Bible’s plot-line. As I use the expression, *biblical theology* refers to the theology of the biblical corpora as God progressively discloses himself, climaxing in the coming of his Son Jesus Christ, and consummating in the new heaven and the new earth. In other words, sequence, history, the passage of time—these are foundational to biblical theology, and relatively minor in systematic theology. What I am suggesting, then, is that a world both

biblically illiterate and sold out to philosophical pluralism demands that our proclamation of the gospel be a subset of biblical theology.

This was a lesson learned by a friend of mine who went to India as a missionary three decades ago. He learned to speak Hindi quite fluently, and preached evangelistically in countless villages. In ten years, he saw many professions of faith, but had planted no churches. He could not get around Hinduism's intrinsic syncretism and pluralism. Hindus could easily accept Jesus, adding him to the religious pot. Deeply discouraged, my friend returned home for a furlough (as "home assignment" was then called), tried to think things through, and returned again to India. This time he restricted himself to two villages. There he began with the nature of God, the doctrine of creation, the nature of the fall, and so forth. *Within this framework* he introduced Jesus. During the next four years, he saw relatively few conversions, but he planted two small churches.

This, surely, is part of the lesson of Acts 17. Paul felt it necessary to establish an entire framework, a framework very largely at odds with the various outlooks of paganism, if the gospel of Christ was to be understood and accepted on its own terms. In some recent evangelistic series, I have set myself a similar task. The first address may be "The God Who Does Not Wipe Out Rebels": the exposition concerns the doctrines of God, creation, and the fall, and leads naturally to the need for a new humanity—with obvious ties to Ephesians, and to Jesus as the new Adam. The second address might be "The God Who Writes His Own Agreements," a treatment of the Abrahamic covenant, with obvious ties to the gospel in Romans 4 and Galatians 3. The third is "The God Who Legislates": Moses, Sinai, and ten commandments are laid down, with ties to the sermon on the mount, the nature of sin, the need for forgiveness. In this way I work through large swaths of the Bible's plot-line. I try, with mixed success, to use categories the secular person can understand, but use them as an "in" into the biblical categories. In each sermon, I move to Jesus and the gospel at some point, for many people, after all, do not come to the entire series, but only to one talk. I know of one evangelistic tool, "2 Ways to Live," that tries to present Christ in six steps, the six steps offering, in contemporary English, something of the Bible's plot-line as the necessary framework in which to understand the gospel.²²

What I am arguing is that without this kind of structure the gospel will not be rightly heard. The doctrine of creation establishes the grounds of our responsibility before God: he made us for himself, and

²² The training booklet is by Phillip Jensen, and can be obtained, along with a very helpful teacher's manual, from: Anglican Information Office, 1st Floor, St. Andrew's House, Sydney Square, Sydney NSW 2000, Australia.

it is the essence of our culpable anarchy that we join the Sinatra crowd and sing, "I did it my way." The doctrine of the fall establishes the nature of our dilemma: by nature and choice we are alienated from God, deceived, justly condemned, without hope in the world, unless God himself delivers us. All of our ills trail from this profound rebellion. Solutions that do not address our alienation from the personal/transcendent God who made us are at best superficial palliatives, at worst deceptive placebos that leave us to die. In this framework, the philosophical pluralist is not on the vanguard of progress, but an idolater.

In a similar way we could work through all the major turning points of redemptive history to establish the framework *which alone makes the good news of Jesus Christ coherent*.²³

This approach to preaching the gospel is, I think, essential when the audience belongs to those most afflicted with biblical illiteracy and philosophical pluralism. But it is scarcely less important, in my view, among the marginally churchied (a very large group indeed), and even among the thoroughly churchied, for all the trends in our society suggest that this basic biblical framework is being lost. It is easier to maintain it than to retrieve it after we lose it by our neglect.

III. *We must herald, again and again, the rudiments of the historic gospel*

This point has three components.

1. *The primary content is the historic gospel*

That embraces a comprehensive articulation of what God has disclosed of himself in history, climactically in Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection. Doubtless we shall expound, as part of this good news, the inauguration of the kingdom, the gift of the Spirit, the forgiveness of sins, the nature of faith, the nature of eternal life, the fruit of the Spirit, the beauty of genuine, God-centered holiness, the nature and purpose of the church, the prospect of the new heaven and new earth, and much more. But everything will be tied to the center, the historic gospel.

2. *We shall herald this good news; we shall proclaim it*

A fair number of voices in our culture advocate dialogue. If what is meant by "dialogue" is that we need to talk to people to find out what they think, and to treat them courteously and respectfully, there can be

²³ For a slightly fuller survey, see D. A. Carson, "Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism," 60-64.

no objection. Similarly, there can be no objection to “dialogue” as opposed to “monologue”: that is, two or more people can talk together, and such talk may be the vehicle for the proclamation of the gospel.

But many voices advocating dialogue go much farther. In our pluralistic environment, they start to insist that dialogue between, say, a Christian and a Muslim must be so evenhanded, so openended, that the Christian, far from entering the discussion with an “arrogant” assumption that Christians have the “right” answer, assumes nothing, and accords opposing opinions the same authority as Christian opinions.

Certainly opposing voices should be accorded the same *courtesy*. But if we insist that they be accorded the same *authority*, we are implicitly adopting philosophical pluralism, at the cost of affirming biblical Christianity. Although various people in the NT engage in dialogue (e.g., Paul *reasons* with people, Acts 17:2), never do they do so from a position of equivocal confidence in the truthfulness and exclusive saving power of the gospel message to which they bear witness. Marshall has shown that the forms of dialogue found in the NT are communication devices, not instruments whereby people with opposing views come together to discover the truth.²⁴ In other words, Christians are never less than heraldic; they are proclaimers; they discharge an ambassadorial function; they are preachers.

3. *The third component is an extrapolation of the other two: there is intellectual content in this heralded gospel, content that must be grasped, proclaimed and taught, grasped afresh, proclaimed afresh, in an ongoing cycle*

I am not for a moment denying that there is an affective element to gospel preaching, or that there is no appeal to the will. Far from it: I insist on both. But the affective element must spring from the play of truth on personality, fallen personality; the appeal to the will must be grounded in content. Gospel proclamation is, in this sense, an intellectual exercise; it is a truth-conveying exercise. There is a battle going on for the mind of men and women;²⁵ well does the apostle know that in the Spirit-empowered proclamation of the whole counsel of God men and women escape conformity to this world and are transformed *by the renewing of their mind* (Rom 12:2).

American evangelicalism is in desperate need of intellectual and theological input. Not a little television evangelicalism is almost empty of content. It is mawkishly sentimental, naively optimistic, frighteningly

²⁴ I. Howard Marshall, “Dialogue with Non-Christians in the New Testament,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 16 (1992) 28–47.

²⁵ See Melvin Tinker, “Battle for the Mind,” *Churchman* 106 (1992) 34–44.

ignorant, openly manipulative.²⁶ Let me again insist: I am not arguing for dry intellectualism, for abstract disputation. But entertainment is not enough; emotional appeals based on very little but tear-jerking stories do not change human behavior; evangelical clichés can never make up for lack of thought. The mentality that thinks in terms of marketing Jesus *inevitably* moves toward progressive distortion of him. There is non-negotiable, biblical, intellectual content to be proclaimed. By all means insist that this content be heralded with conviction and compassion; by all means seek the unction of the Spirit; by all means try to think through how to cast this content in ways that engage the modern secularist. But when all the footnotes are in place, my point remains the same: the historic gospel is unavoidably cast as intellectual content that must be taught and proclaimed.²⁷

These three elements, then, make up my point: we must herald, again and again, the rudiments of the historic gospel.

IV. Often it is helpful to critique the moral and existential bankruptcy of the age

In one of his essays, C. Colson tells of one of his attempts to witness to an acquaintance.²⁸ Colson's testimony was easily dismissed by appealing to new age relativism; his appeal to the authority of Scripture and to arguments for its historical validity proved unconvincing; discussion about the afterlife soon became futile. Somewhat frustrated, Colson brought up the Woody Allen film, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. In this film a doctor hires a killer to murder his mistress. He is not caught, but is haunted by guilt. Unlike the plot in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, however, this doctor finally decides that there is no justice in the universe, and therefore no need for him to suffer the pangs of conscience. There is only Darwinian struggle. Ruthlessness wins. Colson asks his interlocutor, "When we do wrong, is that the only choice? Either live tormented by guilt—or kill our conscience and live like beasts?"

²⁶ See Quentin J. Schultze, *Television and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); Douglas D. Webster, *Selling Jesus: What's Wrong with Marketing the Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992).

²⁷ At this point, one may usefully read Os Guinness and John Seel, ed., *No God but God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age* (Chicago: Moody, 1992); David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

²⁸ Charles Colson, "Reaching the Pagan Mind," *Christianity Today* 36/13 (November 9, 1992) 112.

The man began to listen. Colson went on to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, in which Pierre, wrestling with his conscience, cries out, "Why is it that I know what is right, but do what is wrong?" This led in turn to C. S. Lewis, and finally to Romans, and some introductory reflection on conscience. And from there you are not far from a Christian worldview, and from the gospel itself.

Recognized or not, acknowledged or not, there is a profound and bitter emptiness at the heart of many men and women in Western culture. I am not therefore suggesting that the gospel be reshaped to become that which meets my emptiness: so crassly put, this would be one more way by which evangelicalism is only a whisker from affirming that God exists in order to meet my needs, as I perceive them. Human emptiness and moral confusion must be traced to its roots *in biblical theology*; only in that framework can the historic gospel truly address the underlying problem. Nevertheless, this is an important way into some people's minds and hearts. Not a few people are hungry to escape their isolation. They would like to experience transcendence; at some deep level they long to know God, and to experience relationships, with God and with others, that escape the merely trivial and transient.

If the gospel is presented, then, as that gracious message which connects fallen human beings with the good and sovereign God who made them, and with other people who have tasted and seen that the Lord is good, some men and women will be open to hear more.²⁹ The proclamation will be all the more powerful if the church lives out this kind of life. And that brings me to the fifth point.

*V. While trying to think through what to say, we must
think through how to live*

Contextualization is not an exclusively theoretical challenge; it is also immensely practical. We glimpse this point in 1 Corinthians 8-10, where Paul wrestles with the rights and wrongs of Christians eating meat offered to idols. The steps in the argument are too complex to explore here. The least that must be said, however, is that within certain absolute boundaries, Paul is clearly prepared to let Christians indulge in such food under some circumstances, and not under others. It is within this framework that Paul himself confesses that he becomes all things to all men, so that by all means he may save some

²⁹ Jay C. Rochelle, "Mystery and Relationship as Keys to the Church's Response to Secularism," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 19 (1992) 267-76.

(9:19–23). There is no hint of rigid inflexibility in the great apostle. His motives are stunning: he wants by all means to win some.

As long as American culture embraced so many Christian values, there were few easily observed cultural distinctives connected with being a Christian. As the culture shucks off this heritage, it is becoming more and more important for Christians to think long and hard about how they should live *in styles that openly conflict with the culture*. Perhaps we will not take a job promotion that would mean more time away from the family; perhaps we will choose a simpler lifestyle in order to give more away to missions and to the poor; perhaps we shall be so committed to elementary Christian discipleship that we shall be largely inured against flattery; perhaps we shall treat old and young, rich and poor, the well-connected and the socially unimportant, with the same degree of dignity and respect—a decidedly Christ-like characteristic; perhaps we shall be known as people who work at their marriages, and love their children without trying to live their lives through them; perhaps we shall be known as people who are disciplined in their use of time, in what they watch on TV, in their freedom to make intelligent and moral judgments precisely because they are thoroughly committed to the living God; perhaps we shall be known as people who like to read, think, talk about God and about right and wrong.

The precise way in which the gospel will be contextualized in our lives will vary, in part, according to the culture in which we live. We must never succumb to the temptation to think that gospel living necessarily means conformity to a batch of conservative societal rules. What is clear, however, is that gospel living must be tied to gospel preaching.

VI. *Finally, a short list of practical points*

(1) The primary reason why people in our churches do not invite more of their friends to come to church is that they are embarrassed by what goes on there. At the end of the day, if such embarrassment is triggered by anything other than the offense of the cross, it is the pastors' fault.

(2) Many Christians, not least Christian preachers, simply do not know any out-and-out pagans. It is time they did. They should rearrange priorities and befriend some of them.

(3) The rise of “seeker services” and “the Willow Creek model” has become so sensitive a topic in some quarters that an entire essay could usefully be written on this theme alone. Part of the problem is that in this area many people on both sides of the issue think anti-

thetically: *either* seeker services *or* mere traditionalism. Of course, there are many other possibilities. Without taking the time for thorough evaluation here, perhaps this much may usefully be said. Those committed to seeker services ought constantly to ask themselves if commendable zeal for the lost does not sometimes lead them into a lamentable pragmatism that unwittingly displaces worship by aesthetics, transforms biblical understanding of conversion into the shallowest kinds of decisionism with all the real life-transforming content introduced after “conversion” in various small-group therapy sessions, and reduces God to the status of divine genie: he helps me when I need him. Those committed to traditional services may be safe enough in conservative enclaves in the country, but if they exist in a social context where virtually everything they do in corporate meetings is utterly alien to men and women all around them, they must ask what pains they ought to take to explain what they are doing to outsiders, and to forego their own comfort zones for the sake of communicating the gospel.

(4) But the important point is that there are many useful alternatives to the anthesis, seeker service *or* traditional service. Many churches use “guest services” to which believers are especially encouraged to bring unconverted guests. Those services include singing, prayers, preaching—but every element is carefully and wisely explained. The leader does not say, “Turn to hymn #33.” Rather, he or she says, “Christians have always loved to sing praises to the God they have come to know and trust. In this church we sing many such songs, drawn from various periods of the church’s history. The one we are going to sing now was written about two centuries ago, by a man whose Christian faith was tested by recurring bouts of mental illness. You will find it as #33 of the blue book on the rack in front of you. When the musical instruments begin, it is our custom to stand to sing.”

Something similar can be done for each aspect of the service, including prayer, any liturgical readings, testimonies. Assume visitors have *never* been to *any* church. Those who have will not be offended by such gentle explanations, and may be instructed by them; those who have not will be greatly helped. The value in preserving the normal patterns of corporate worship, even while gently explaining them, is that outsiders are introduced to the church as a *worshiping* community, and feel the power of corporate reverence. Even the Lord’s Table can be celebrated in a kerygmatic fashion (surely presupposed in 1 Cor 11:26).

(5) Develop evangelistic Bible studies for complete outsiders.

(6) Some churches in big cities develop brief and pungent noon-hour services for business people, often combined with an inexpensive lunch.

(7) Many, many companies allow their employees, during lunch breaks, to form themselves into various groups or clubs or societies for diverse purposes. It is quite possible to start evangelistic studies in such settings, provided there is just one employee in the company with a little courage.

(8) Very frequently I begin an evangelistic series to complete outsiders (university students, perhaps) with something like this: "If you think I have come to defend Christianity, guess again! For some of us, Christianity is so little known and understood that defending it would be like defending the general theory of relativity to a first year arts major. What I shall be doing, rather, is outlining, explaining, and showing the relevance of some of the fundamentals of any kind of Christianity that tries to be faithful to its founding documents, gathered together in a book that we call the Bible. If there is defense, it will be largely implicit. But I hope you will listen carefully and thoughtfully as you enter into a world of thought and experience that you may never have encountered."

I find that some such introduction as that changes the focus of expectations. At the end of each talk, people come out talking about the gospel, not about apologetics.

(9) Be bold. That is not an invitation to discourtesy. But boldness, coupled with an unassuming humility that conveys the impression Christians are only poor beggars telling others where there is bread, will always elicit better attention than the half-embarrassed, semi-apologetic bearing of the person who is more frightened of people than of the living God.

(10) In my view, it is usually best (though there are exceptional circumstances that overturn this preference) that these evangelistic sermons be expository messages, not topical ones. Of course, unbelievers will not bring Bibles, so it is necessary to instruct people to turn to a certain page number in the black (brown/green/red, etc.) book in front of them (assuming there is a pew Bible). Where the address is not in a church, so that Bibles are not available (e.g., at a university mission), it is possible to put a typed copy of the relevant chapter or half-chapter on each seat.³⁰ The prime reasons this approach is wiser than the purely topical approach with minimal reference to biblical texts are: (1) It directs people's attention to the Bible, not to the preacher, and, if done properly, draws them into reading the Bible for themselves. (2) By directing people to think through texts, the preacher is helping them

³⁰ This does *not* infringe copyright—at least, not for the NIV, which I have normally used. A copy of their policy statement is available from Zondervan Corporation; I have verified my reading of it by personal correspondence with the Corporation.

to think linearly, coherently, through God's gracious self-disclosure in human words.

(11) Remember that men and women are not converted, finally, by your sagacity, oratory, theological brilliance or homiletical skill. God in his mercy may use all these and many more gifts. But only God is able to bring people to himself. That is ample incentive to prayer.

Final Reflections

A grain of sand in an oyster produces a pearl; in the view of Hulmes, agnosticism can similarly become an "irritant" that generates richer witness.³¹ In the same way, the worst features of pluralism may grind us down, or become "irritants" which, in the providence of God, are used to recall the church to basics and to develop a renewed biblical emphasis on the gospel, within the framework of the Bible's plot-line.

If many remain unconvinced, so be it. The Scots preacher J. S. Stewart was not perturbed that some people did not believe in mission. They had no right to believe in mission, he reflected, since they did not believe in Christ.³² By contrast, the missionary statesman S. Neill wrote:³³

When a man, by constant contemplation of the Passion and Resurrection of our Lord, finds himself so inflamed with love of God and man that he cannot bear the thought of any man living and dying without the knowledge of God, he may begin to bear the Cross of Christ. If, as he bears it, this longing for the glory of God and for the salvation of all men becomes so great that it fills all his thoughts and desires, then he has that one thing without which no man can truly be a messenger of Christ.

³¹ Edward Hulmes, "The Irritant of Agnosticism," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 6 (1985) 14-24.

³² I draw this example from Nigel M. de S. Cameron, "Perspectives on Religious Pluralism," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 10/2 (1992) 79.

³³ Stephen Neill, *Out of Bondage* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh House Press, n.d.) 135-36. Cited also in Hulmes, *art. cit.*, 19.