being missional christians In a postmodern world

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The two foundational talks; "Worldview Evangelism – Athens Revisited" by Don Carson and "The Gospel and the Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World" by Tim Keller contain insightful biblical principals on how to be missional Christians in todays postmodern world in today's. Both are in the public domain on the World wide Web. - Editor

Worldview Evangelism - Athens Revisited

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I would like to think that most of us have become convinced of the primacy of what might generically be called worldview evangelism. In the recent past, at least in North America and Europe, evangelism consisted of a fairly aggressive presentation of one small part of the Bible's story line. Most non-Christians to whom we presented the gospel shared enough common language and outlook with us that we did not find it necessary to unpack the entire plot line of the Bible. A mere quarter of a century ago, if we were dealing with an atheist, he or she was not a generic atheist but a Christian atheist-that is, the God he or she did not believe in was more or less a god of discernibly Judeo-Christian provenance. The atheist was not particularly denying the existence of Hindu gods — Krishna, perhaps — but the God of the Bible. But that meant that the categories were still ours. The domain of discourse was ours.

When I was a child, if I had said, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see," 80 percent of the kids in my school could have responded, "Hall the incarnate deity." That was because Christmas carols like "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" were sung in home, church, school, and street. These kids may not have understood all-the words, but this domain of Christian discourse was still theirs. Young people at university doubtless imbibed massive doses of naturalism, but in most English departments it was still assumed you could not plumb the vast heritage of English poetry if you possessed no knowledge of the language, metaphors, themes, and categories of the Bible. In those days, then, evangelism presupposed that most unbelievers, whether they were atheists or agnostics or deists or theists, nevertheless knew that the Bible begins with God, that this God is both personal and transcendent, that he made the universe and made it good, and that the Fall introduced sin and attracted the curse. Virtually everyone knew that the Bible has two Testaments. History moves in a straight line. There is a difference between good and evil, right and wrong, truth and error, fact and fiction.

They knew that Christians believe there is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be feared. Christmas is bound up with Jesus' birth; Good Friday and Easter, with Jesus' death and resurrection. Those were the givens. So what we pushed in evangelism was the seriousness of sin, the freedom of grace, who Jesus really is, what his death is about, and the urgency of repentance and faith. That was evangelism. Of course, we tilted things in certain ways depending on the people we were addressing; the focus was different when evangelizing in different subcultural settings — in the Bible Belt, for instance, or in an Italian-Catholic section of New York, or in an Ivy League university. But for most of us, evangelism was connected with articulating and pressing home a very small part of the Bible's plot line.

In many seminaries like Trinity, of course, we recognized that missionaries being trained to communicate the gospel in radically different cultures needed something more. A missionary to Japan or Thailand or north India would have to learn not only another language or two but also another culture. No less important, they would have to begin their evangelism farther back, because many of their hearers would have no knowledge of the Bible at all and would tenaciously hold to some worldview structures that were fundamentally at odds with the Bible. The best schools gave such training to their missionary candidates. But pastors and campus workers were rarely trained along such lines. After all, they were doing nothing more than evangelizing people who shared their own cultural assumptions, or at least people located in the same domain of discourse, weren't they?

We were naive, of course. We were right, a quarter of a century ago, when we sang, "The times they are a-changin'." Of course, there were many places in America where you could evangelize churchy people who still retained substantial elements of a Judeo-Christian worldview. There are still places like that today: the over-fifties in the Midwest, parts of the Bible Belt. But in the New England states, in the Pacific Northwest, in universities almost anywhere in the country, in pockets of the population such as media people, and in many parts of the entire Western world, the degree of biblical illiteracy cannot be overestimated. One of my students commented a week ago that he was walking in Chicago with his girlfriend, who had a wooden cross hanging from a chain around her neck. A lad stopped her on the sidewalk and asked why she had a plus sign for a necklace. The people whom we evangelize on university campuses usually do not know that the Bible has two Testaments. As Phillip Jensen says, you have to explain to them the purpose of the big numbers and little numbers. They have never heard of Abraham, David, Solomon, Paul — let alone Haggai or Zechariah. They may have heard of Moses, but only so as to confuse him with Charlton Heston.

But this analysis is still superficial. My point is not so much that these people are ignorant of biblical data (though that is true) as that, having lost touch with the Judeo-Christian heritage that in one form or another (sometimes bowdlerized) long nourished the West, they are not clean slates waiting for us to write on them. They are not empty hard drives waiting for us to download our Christian files onto them. Rather, they have inevitably developed an array of alternative worldviews. They are hard drives full of many other files that collectively constitute various non-Christian frames of reference.

The implications for evangelism are immense. I shall summarize four.

First, the people we wish to evangelize hold some fundamental positions that they are going to have to abandon to become Christians. To continue my computer analogy, they retain numerous files that are going to have to be erased or revised, because as presently written, those files are going to clash formidably with Christian files. At one level, of course, that is always so. That is why the gospel demands repentance and faith; indeed, it demands the regenerating, transforming work of the Spirit of God. But the less there is of a common, shared worldview between "evangelizer" and "evangelizee," between the biblically informed Christian and the biblically illiterate postmodern, the more traumatic the transition, the more decisive the change, the more stuff has to be unlearned.

Second, under these conditions evangelism means starting farther back. The good news of Jesus Christ — who he is and what he accomplished by his death, resurrection, and exaltation — is simply incoherent unless certain structures are already in place. You cannot make heads or tails of the real Jesus unless you have categories for the personal/transcendent God of the Bible; the nature of human beings made in the image of God; the sheer odium of rebellion against him; the curse that our rebellion has attracted; the spiritual, personal, familial, and social effects of our transgression; the nature of salvation; the holiness and wrath and love of God. One cannot make sense of the Bible's plot line without such basic ingredients; one cannot make sense of the Bible's portrayal of Jesus without such blocks in place. We cannot possibly agree on the solution that Jesus provides if we cannot agree on the problem he confronts.

That is why our evangelism must be "worldview" evangelism. I shall flesh out what this means in a few moments.

Third, not for a moment am I suggesting that worldview evangelism is a restrictively propositional exercise. It is certainly not less than propositional; the Bible not only presents us with many propositions, but it insists in some cases that unless one believes those propositions one is lost. The point can easily be confirmed by a close reading of the gospel of John. For all its complementary perspectives, it repeatedly makes statements like "Unless you believe that . . ." One really ought not be forced to choose between propositions and relational faith any more than one should be forced to choose between the left wing of an airplane and the right. At its core, worldview evangelism is as encompassing as the Bible. We are called not only to certain propositional confession but also to loyal faith in Jesus Christ, the truth incarnate; to repentance from dead works to serve the living God; to life transformed by the Holy Spirit, given to us in anticipation of the consummated life to come; to a new community that lives and loves and behaves in joyful and principled submission to the Word of the King, our Maker and Redeemer. This massive worldview touches everything, embraces everything. It can be simply put, for it has a center; it can be endlessly expounded and lived out, for in its scope it has no restrictive perimeter.

Fourth, the evangelist must find ways into the values, heart, thought patterns — in short, the worldview — of those who are being evangelized but must not let that non-Christian worldview domesticate the biblical message. The evangelist must find bridges into the other's frame of reference, or no communication is possible; the evangelist will remain ghettoized. Nevertheless, faithful worldview evangelism under these circumstances will sooner or later find the evangelist trying to modify or destroy some of the alien worldview an d to present another entire structure of thought and conduct that is unimaginably more glorious, coherent, consistent, and finally true.

All of this, of course, the apostle Paul well understood. In particular, by his own example he teaches us the difference between evangelizing those who largely share your biblical worldview and evangelizing those who are biblically illiterate. In Acts 13:16-41, we read Paul's evangelistic address in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. The setting, a synagogue, ensures that his hearers are Jews, Gentile proselytes to Judaism, and Godfearers — in every case, people thoroughly informed by the Bible (what we would today call the Old Testament). In this context, Paul selectively narrates Old Testament history in order to prove that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah. He

quotes biblical texts, reasons his way through them, and argues that the resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of biblical prophecies about the Holy One in David's line not seeing decay From Jesus' resurrection, Paul argues back to Jesus' death and its significance — ultimately, the forgiveness of sins and justification before God (vv. 38-39). Paul ends with a biblical passage warning of fearful judgment against skepticism and unbelief. Here, then, is the apostolic equivalent to evangelism among churchy folk, biblically literate folk-the kind of people who already, at a certain level, know their Bibles. In Acts 17:16-34, however, one finds the apostle Paul evangelizing intelligent Athenians who are utterly biblically illiterate. Here his approach is remarkably different, and has much to teach us as we attempt to evangelize a new generation of biblical illiterates.

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for

‘In him we live and move and have our being’;
as even some of your own poets have said,
‘For we are indeed his offspring.’

Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

I have organized the rest of what I have to say under four topics: the face realities, adopt priorities, establish a framework, and preach a nonnegotiable gospel.

FACE REALITIES

Apart from their obvious biblical illiteracy — these Athenian intellectuals had never heard of Moses, never read a Bible - three features of this culture are striking.

First, the Roman Empire was characterized not only by large-scale empirical pluralism but also by government-sponsored religious pluralism. The Romans knew that a captive people were more likely to rebel if they could align religion, land, and people. Partly to break up this threefold cord, the Romans insisted on adopting into their own pantheon some of the gods of any newly subjugated people, and they insisted equally strongly that the newly subjugated people adopt some of the Roman gods. In any potential civil war, therefore, it would be quite unclear which side the gods were helping — and this policy of god-swaps strengthened the likelihood of imperial peace. It also meant that religious pluralism was not only endemic to the Empire but was buttressed by the force of law After all, it was a capital offense to desecrate a temple — any temple. But let no temple and no God challenge Washington — I mean Rome.

Second, like us, Paul was dealing not with people who were biblically illiterate and therefore had no worldview, but with people who vociferously argued for various competing and powerful worldviews. Two are mentioned in the text: Epicurean and Stoic (v. 18). In the first century, philosophy did not have the fairly esoteric and abstract connotations it has today, connected with minor departments in large universities. It referred to an entire way of life, based on a rigorous and self-consistent intellectual system — close to what we mean by worldview The ideal of Epicurean philosophy, Epicurean worldview, 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 hurly-burly of life, so human beings should seek the same ideal. But over against this vision, as we shall see, 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, as someone has commented, was "marked by great moral earnestness and a high sense of duty." Against such a vision, the God that Paul presents, far from being pantheistic, is personal, distinct from the creation, and is our final judge. Instead of focusing on "universal reason tapped into by human reasoning," Paul contrasts divine will and sovereignty with human dependence and need. In short, there is a massive clash of worldviews.

Of course, there were other Greek and Latin worldviews. There is no mention here of the sophists or of the atheistic philosophical materialists such as Lucretius. What is

clear is that Paul here finds himself evangelizing men and women deeply committed to one fundamentally alien worldview or another.

Third, no less striking is the sneering tone of condescension they display in verse 18: What is this babbler trying to say? — this "seed picker," this little bird fluttering around picking up disconnected scraps of incoherent information, this second-class mind? Others remarked, He seems to be advocating foreign gods. Of course, as it turns out, some of these people become genuinely interested in the gospel. The tenor of condescension is unmistakable, however, when an alien worldview feels secure in its thoughtless majority these, then, are the realities Paul faces.

2. ADOPT PRIORITIES

The most immediate and striking response of the apostle Paul to all that he witnesses in Athens is an intuitively biblical analysis: he is greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols (v. 16). Paul might have been overwhelmed by Athens' reputation as the Oxford or Cambridge or Harvard of the ancient world (though universities per se did not then exist). He might have admired the architecture, gaping at the Parthenon. But Paul is neither intimidated nor snookered by Athens; he sees the idolatry. How we need Christians in our universities and high places who are neither impressed nor intimidated by reputation and accomplishment if it is nothing more than idolatry!

The apostle sets out, then, to evangelize. He aims at two quite different groups. As usual, he attaches a certain priority to evangelizing Jews and Godfearing Gentiles, the churchy folk, the biblically literate people; he reasons in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks (v. 17a). He has a theological reason for this priority that we cannot examine here, but in any case we must never forget to evangelize such people. Second, he evangelizes the ordinary pagans who have no connection with the Bible: he evangelizes day by day in the market place, targeting anyone who happens to be there, most of whom would have been biblically illiterate (v. 17b). He does not wait for an invitation to the Areopagus. He simply gets on with his evangelism, and the invitation to the Areopagus is the result (v. 18).

These, then, are his priorities: God-centered cultural analysis, and persistent evangelism of both biblical literates and biblical illiterates.

Perhaps I should add that there is at least one fundamental difference between Paul's situation and ours. When Paul evngelizes biblical illiterates, he is dealing with people whose heritage has not in recent centuries had anything to do with biblical religion. So when they react negatively to him, they do so solely because, from their perspective, his frame of reference is so alien to their own. They are not rejecting him in part because they are still running away from their own heritage. That is the additional problem we sometimes face. We sometimes deal with men and women who have adopted a worldview that is not only at several points profoundly antithetical to a biblical worldview but also self-consciously chosen over against that biblical worldview. That opens up some opportunities for us, but it raises some additional barriers as well. However, we cannot probe these opportunities and barriers here. It is enough to observe the priorities that Paul adopts.

3. ESTABLISH THE FRAMEWORK

Here it will be helpful to run through Paul's argument from 17:22 to 17:31. Before I do so, however, I want to make three preliminary observations.

First, it takes you about two minutes to read this record of Paul's address. But speeches before the Areopagus were not known for their brevity. In other words, we must remember that this is a condensed report of a much longer speech. Doubtless every sentence, in some cases every clause, constituted a point that Paul expanded upon at length.

Second, if you want to know a little more closely just how he would have expanded each point, it is easier to discover than some people think. For there are many points of comparison between these sermon notes and, for instance, Romans. I'll draw attention to one or two of the parallels as we move on.

Third, there is a fascinating choice of vocabulary. It has often been shown that many of the expressions in this address, especially in the early parts, are the sorts of things one would have found in Stoic circles. Yet in every case, Paul tweaks them so that in his context they convey the peculiar emphases he wants to assign to them. In other words, **the vocabulary is linguistically appropriate to his hearers**, but at the level of the sentence and the paragraph, Paul in this report is saying just what he wants to say; he is establishing a biblical worldview.

Now let us scan the framework Paul establishes.

First, he establishes that God is the creator of the world and everything in it (17:24). How much he enlarged on this point we cannot be certain, but we know from his other writings how his mind ran. The creation establishes that God is other than the created order; pantheism is ruled out. It also establishes human accountability; we owe our Creator everything, and to defy him and set ourselves up as the center of the universe is the heart of all sin. Worse, to cherish and worship created things instead of the Creator is the essence of idolatry.

Second, Paul insists that God is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands (v. 24). The sovereignty of God over the whole universe stands over against views that assign this god or that goddess a particular domain — perhaps the sea (Neptune), or tribal gods with merely regional or ethnic interests. The God of the Bible is sovereign over everything. This teaching grounds the doctrine of providence. Because of the universality of his reign, God cannot be domesticated — not even by temples (v. 24). Paul is not denying the historical importance of the temple in Jerusalem, still less that God uniquely disclosed himself there. Rather, he denies that God is limited to temples, and that he can be domesticated or squeezed or tapped into by the cultus of any temple (which of course threatens popular pagan practice). He is so much bigger than that.

Third, God is the God of aseity: he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything (17:25). Aseity is a word now largely fallen into disuse, though it was common in Puritan times. Etymologically it comes from the Latin *a se* — "from himself." God is so utterly "from himself" that he does not need us; he is not only self-

existent (a term we often deploy with respect to God's origins — the existence of everything else is God-dependent, but God himself is self-existent), but he is utterly independent of his created order so far as his own well-being or contentment or existence are concerned. God does not need us — a very different perspective from that of polytheism, where human beings and gods interact in all kinds of ways bound up with the finiteness and needs of the gods. The God of the Bible would not come to us if, rather whimsically, he wanted a McDonald's hamburger; the cattle on a thousand hills are already his.

Fourth, the truth of the matter is the converse: we are utterly dependent on him — he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else (v. 25b). This strips us of our vaunted independence; it is the human correlative of the doctrines of creation and providence.

Fifth, from theology proper, Paul turns to anthropology. He insists that all nations descended from one man (v. 26). This contradicts not a few ancient notions of human descent, which conjectured that different ethnic groups came into being in quite different ways. But Paul has a universal gospel that is based on a universal problem (cf. Rom. 5; 1 Cor. 15). If sin and death were introduced into the one human race by one man such that the decisive act of another man is required to reverse them, then it is important for Paul to get the anthropology right so that the soteriology is right. We cannot agree on the solution if we cannot agree on the problem. But Paul's stance has yet wider implications; there is no trace of racism here. Moreover, however much he holds that God has enjoyed a peculiar covenant relationship with Israel, because he is a monotheist, Paul holds that God must be sovereign over all the nations. Did he, perhaps, develop some of the lines of argument one finds in Isaiah 40ff.? If there is but one God, that God must in some sense be the God of all, whether his being and status are recognized by all or not.

Sixth, for the first time one finds an explicit reference to something wrong in this universe that God created. His providential rule over all was with the purpose that some would reach out for him and find him (v. 27). In short order Paul will say much more about sin (without actually using the word). Here he is preparing the way. The assumption is that the race as a whole does not know the God who made them. Something has gone profoundly wrong.

Seventh, although it has been important for him to establish God's transcendence, Paul does not want such an emphasis to drift toward what would later be called deism. The God he has in mind is not far from each one of us (v. 27). He is immanent. Paul will not allow any suspicion that God is careless or indifferent about people; he is never far from us. Moreover, the apostle recognizes that some of this truth is acknowledged in some pagan religions. When Greek thought (or much of it) spoke of one "God" as opposed to many gods, very often the assumption was more or less pantheistic. That structure of thought Paul has already ruled out. Still, some of its emphases were not wrong if put within a better framework. We live and move and have our being in this God, and we are his offspring (17:28) — not, for Paul, in some pantheistic sense, but as an expression of God's personal and immediate concern for our well-being.

Eighth, the entailment of this theology and this anthropology is to clarify what sin is and to make idolatry utterly reprehensible (v. 29). Doubtless Paul enlarged this point very much in terms of, say, Isaiah 44-45 and Romans 1. For he cannot rightly introduce Jesus and his role as Savior until he establishes what the problem is; he cannot make the good news clear until he elucidates the bad news from which the good news rescues us.

Ninth, Paul also introduces what might be called a philosophy of history — or better, perhaps, a certain view of time. Many Greeks in the ancient world thought that time went round and round in circles. Paul establishes a linear framework: creation at a fixed point; a long period that is past with respect to Paul's present in which God acted in a certain way (In the past God over-looked such ignorance); a now that is pregnant with massive changes; and a future (v. 31) that is the final termination of this world order, a time of final judgment. The massive changes of Paul's dramatic now are bound up with the coming of Jesus and the dawning of the gospel. Paul has set the stage so as to introduce Jesus. So here is the framework Paul establishes. He has, in fact, constructed a biblical worldview. But he has not done so simply for the pleasure of creating a worldview. In this context he has done so in order to provide a framework in which Jesus himself, not least his death and resurrection, makes sense. Otherwise nothing that Paul wants to say about Jesus will make sense.

This is the framework Paul establishes.

4. PREACH THE NON NEGOTIABLE GOSPEL

We read again verse 31:

For [God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice
by the man he has appointed.
He has given proof of this to all men
by raising him from the dead.

Here, at last, Jesus is introduced.

I want to emphasize two things.

First, it is extraordinarily important to see that Paul has established the framework of the biblical metanarrative before he introduces Jesus. If metaphysics is a sort of big physics that explains all the other branches of physics, similarly metanarrative is the big story that explains all the other stories. By and large, postmodernists love stories, especially ambiguous or symbol-laden narratives. But they hate the metanarrative, the big story that makes all the little stories coherent. But what Paul provides is the biblical metanarrative. This is the big story in the Bible that frames and explains all the little stories. Without this big story, the accounts of Jesus will not make any sense — and Paul knows it.

For instance, if in a vague, New Age, postmodern context, we affirm something like "God loves you," this short expression may carry a very different set of associations than we who are Christians might think. We already assume that men and women are guilty and that the clearest and deepest expression of God's love is in the cross, where

God's own Son dealt with our sin at the expense of his own life. But if people know nothing of this story line, then the same words, "God loves you," may be an adequate summary of the stance adopted by Jodie Foster in her recent film, *Contact*. The alien power is beneficent, wise, good, and interested in our well-being. There is nothing whatever to do with moral
accountability, sin, guilt, and how God takes action to remove our sin by the death of his Son. The one vision nestles into the framework of biblical Christianity; the other nestles comfortably into the worldview of New Age optimism. In short, without the big story, without the metanarrative, the little story or the little expression becomes either incoherent or positively misleading. Paul understands the point.

Second, what is striking is that Paul does not flinch from affirming the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. And that is what causes so much offense that Paul is cut off, and the Areopagus address comes to an end. Paul was thoroughly aware, of course, that most Greeks adopted some form of dualism. Matter is bad, or at least relatively bad; spirit is good. To imagine someone coming back from the dead in bodily form was not saying anything desirable, still less believable. Bodily resurrection from the dead was irrational; it was an oxymoron, like intelligent slug or boiled ice. So some of Paul's hearers have had enough, and they openly sneer and end the meeting (v. 32).

If Paul had spoken instead of Jesus' immortality, his eternal spiritual longevity quite apart from any body, he would have caused no umbrage. But Paul does not flinch. Elsewhere he argues that if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then the apostles are liars, and we are still dead in our trespasses and sins (I Cor. 15). He remains faithful to that vision here. Paul does not trim the gospel to make it acceptable to the worldview of his listeners.

For Paul, then, there is some irreducible and nonnegotiable content to the gospel, content that must not be abandoned, no matter how unacceptable it is to some other worldview. It follows that especially when we are trying hard to connect wisely with some worldview other than our own, we must give no less careful attention to the nonnegotiables of the gospel, lest in our efforts to communicate wisely and with relevance, we unwittingly sacrifice what we mean to communicate.

But suddenly we overhear the muttered objection of the critic. Can it not be argued that Paul here makes a fundamental mistake? Elsewhere in Acts he frequently preaches with much greater fruitfulness, and in those cases he does not stoop to all this worldview stuff. He just preaches Jesus and his cross and resurrection, and men and women get converted.

Here, a piddling number believe (v. 34). In fact, Paul's next stop in Greece after Athens is Corinth. Reflecting later on his experiences there, Paul writes to the Corinthians and reminds them For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (I Cor. 2:2) — doubtless because he was reflecting with some sour-faced chagrin on his flawed approach in Athens. So let us be frank, the critics charge, and admit that Paul made a huge mistake in Athens and stop holding up Acts 17 as if it were a model of anything except what not to do. The man goofed: he appealed to natural theology; he tried to construct redemptive history; he attempted to form a worldview when he should have stuck to his last and preached Jesus and the cross.

I sometimes wish this reading were correct, but it is profoundly mistaken for a number of reasons.

(1) It is not the natural reading of Acts. As Luke works through his book, he does not at this point in his narrative send up a red flag and warn us that at this point Paul makes a ghastly mistake. The false reading is utterly dependent on taking I Corinthians in a certain way (a mistaken way, as we shall see), and then reading it into Acts 17.

(2) What Paul expresses, according to Luke's report of the Areopagus address, is very much in line with Paul's own theology, not least his theology in the opening chapters of Romans.

(3) Strictly speaking, Paul does not say that only a "few" men believed. He says *tines de andres*, "certain people," along with *heteroi*, "others." These are in line with other descriptions. The numbers could scarcely have been large, because the numbers in the Areopagus could not have been very large in the first place.

(4) Transparently, Paul was cut off when he got to the resurrection of Jesus (vv. 31-32). But judging from all we know of him — both from a book like Romans and from the descriptions of him in Acts — we know where he would have gone from here.

(5) That is entirely in line with the fact that what Paul had already been preaching in the marketplace to the biblically illiterate pagans was the gospel" (v. 18).

(6) At this point in his life Paul was not a rookie. Far from being fresh out of seminary and still trying to establish the precise pattern of his ministry, on any chronology he had already been through twenty years of thrilling and brutal ministry. Nor is this Paul's first time among biblically illiterate pagans or among intellectuals.

(7) In any case, I Corinthians 2 does not cast Paul's resolve to preach Christ crucified against the background of what had happened to him in Athens. He does not say, in effect, "Owing to my serious mistakes in Athens, when I arrived in Corinth I resolved to preach only Christ and him crucified." Rather, in 1 Corinthians Paul's resolve to preach Christ crucified is cast against the background of what Christians in Corinth were attracted to — namely, to a form of triumphalism that espoused an ostensible wisdom that Paul detests. It is a wisdom full of pride and rhetoric and showmanship. Against this background, Paul takes a very different course. Knowing that believers must boast only in the Lord and follow quite a different wisdom (I Cor. 1), he resolves to preach Christ and him crucified.

(8) In any case, it would be wrong to think that Paul has no interest in worldviews. Writing after I Corinthians 2, Paul can say, We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:45). The context shows that Paul is not here interested so much in disciplining the individual's private thought life (though that certainly concerns him elsewhere) as in bringing into obedience to Christ every thought structure, every worldview, that presents opposition to his beloved Master. In

other words, Paul thought "worldviewishly" (if that is not too monstrous a neologism). That is clear in many of his writings; it is clear in both 2 Corinthians 10 and in Acts 17.

(9) Finally, the first line of Acts 17:34 is sometimes misconstrued: "A few men became followers of Paul and believed." Many have assumed Luke means that a few people became Christians on the spot and followers of Paul. But that reverses what is said. Moreover, Paul has not yet given much gospel — in precisely what sense would they have become Christians? It is better to follow the text exactly Following Paul's address, no one became a Christian on the spot. But some did become followers of Paul. In consequence, in due course they grasped the gospel and believed; they became Christians. This is entirely in line with the experience of many evangelists working in a university environment today

A couple of years ago I spoke evangelistically at a large meeting in Oxford. So far as I know, no one became a Christian at that meeting. But sixteen students signed up for a six-week "Discovering Christianity" Bible study. A few weeks after the meeting, the curate, Vaughan Roberts, wrote me a note to tell me that eleven of the sixteen had clearly become Christians already, and he was praying for the remaining five. In other words, as a result of that meeting, some became "followers of Jesus," and in due course believed. That is often the pattern when part of the evangelistic strategy is to establish a worldview, a frame of reference, to make the meaning of Jesus and the gospel unmistakably plain.

In short, however sensitive Paul is to the needs and outlook of the people he is evangelizing, and however flexible he is in shaping the gospel to address them directly, we must see that there remains for him irreducible content to the gospel. That content is nonnegotiable, even if it is remarkably offensive to our hearers. If it is offensive, we may have to decide whether it is offensive because of the intrinsic message or because we have still not done an adequate job of establishing the frame of reference in which it alone makes sense. But the gospel itself must never be compromised.

SOME CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

I offer three concluding reflections.

First, the challenge of worldview evangelism is not to make simple things complicated but to make clear to others some fairly complicated things that we simply assume. This can be done in fifteen minutes with the sort of presentation Phillip Jensen and Tony Payne have constructed. It might be done in seven consecutive expositions running right through the first eight chapters of Romans. It might be done with the six months of Bible teaching, beginning with Genesis, that many New Tribes Mission personnel now use before they get to Jesus. But it must be done.

Second, the challenge of worldview evangelism is not primarily to think in philosophical categories, but it is to make it clear that closing with Jesus has content (it is connected with a real, historical Jesus about whom certain things must be said and believed) and is all-embracing (it affects conduct, relationships, values, priorities). It is not reducible to a preferential religious option among many, designed primarily to make me feel good about myself.

Third, the challenge of worldview evangelism is not primarily a matter of how to get back into the discussion with biblically illiterate people whose perspectives may be very dissimilar to our own. Rather, worldview evangelism focuses primarily on where the discussion goes. There are many ways of getting into discussion; the crucial question is whether the Christian witness has a clear, relatively simple, straightforward grasp of what the Bible's story line is, how it must give form to a worldview, and how the wonderful news of the gospel fits powerfully into this true story — all told in such a way that men and women can see its relevance, power, truthfulness, and life-changing capacity.

Don Carson

The Gospel and the Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World

Tim Keller

A Crisis for Evangelism

Our current cultural situation poses a crisis for the way evangelicals have been doing evangelism for the past 150 years—causing us to raise crucial questions like: How do we do evangelism today? How do we get the gospel across in a postmodern world?

In 1959 Martyn Lloyd-Jones gave a series of messages on revival. One of his expositions was on Mark 9, where Jesus comes off the mountain of transfiguration and discovers his disciples trying unsuccessfully to exorcise a demon from a boy. After he rids the youth of the demonic presence, the disciples ask him, "Why could we not cast it out?" Jesus answers, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer" (Mark 9:28–29). Jesus was teaching his disciples that their ordinary methods did not work for "*this kind.*" Lloyd-Jones went on to apply this to the church:

> Here, in this boy, I see the modern world, and in the disciples I see the Church of God. . . . I see a very great difference between today and two hundred years ago, or indeed even one hundred years ago. The difficulty in those earlier times was that men and women were in a state of apathy. They were more or

> less asleep. . . . There was no general denial of Christian truth. It was just that people did not trouble to practise it. . . . All you had to do then was to awaken them and to rouse them. . . .
>
> But the question is whether that is still the position. . . . What is 'this kind'? . . . The kind of problem facing us is altogether deeper and more desperate. . . . The very belief in God has virtually gone. . . . The average man today believes that all this belief about God and religion and salvation . . . is an incubus on human nature all through the centuries. . . .It is no longer merely a question of immorality. This has become an amoral or a non-moral society. The very category of morality is not recognised. . . .The power that the disciples had was a good power, and it was able to do good work in casting out the feeble devils, but it was no value in the case of that boy.1

Put simply, Jesus is saying, *the demon is in too deep for your ordinary way of doing ministry*. It is intriguing that Lloyd-Jones said this some time before Lesslie Newbigin began to propound the thesis that Western society was a mission field again.2 Indeed it was perhaps the most challenging mission field yet, because no one had ever had to evangelize on a large scale a society that *used* to be Christian. Certainly there have been many times in the past when the church was in serious decline, and revival revitalized the faith and society. But in those times society was still nominally Christian. There hadn't been a wholesale erosion of the very concepts of God and truth and of the basic reliability and wisdom of the Bible. Things are different now.

Inoculation introduces a mild form of a disease into a body, thereby stimulating the growth of antibodies and rendering the person immune to getting a full-blown version of the sickness. In the same way, *post*-Christian society contains unique resistance and "antibodies" against full-blown Christianity. For example, the memory of sustained injustices that flourished under more Christianized Western societies has become an antibody against the gospel. *Christianity was big back when blacks had to sit on the back of the bus and when women were beaten up by men without consequences. We've tried out a Christian society and it wasn't so hot. Been there. Done that.* In a society like ours, most people only know of either a very mild, nominal Christianity or a separatist, legalistic Christianity. Neither of these is, may we say, "the real thing."

But exposure to them creates spiritual antibodies, as it were, making the listener extremely resistant to the gospel. These antibodies are now everywhere in our society.

During the rest of his sermon on Mark 9, Lloyd-Jones concludes that the evangelism and church-growth methods of the past couple of centuries, while perfectly good for their time (he was careful to say that), would no longer work. What was needed now was something far more comprehensive and far-reaching than a new set of evangelistic programs.

I believe that Lloyd-Jones's diagnosis is completely on target. Richard Fletcher's *The Barbarian Conversion* traces the way in which Christians evangelized in a pagan

context from a.d. 500–1500.3 During that time major swaths of Europe (especially the countryside rather than the cities) remained pre-Christian pagan. They lacked the basic "worldview furniture" of the Christian mind. They did not have a Christian understanding of God, truth, or sin, or of peculiar Christian ethical practices. Evangelism and Christian instruction were a very long and comprehensive process.

But eventually nearly everyone in Europe (and then in North America) was born into a world that was (at least intellectually) Christian. People were educated into a basic Christian-thought framework—a Christian view of God, of soul and body, of heaven and hell, of rewards and punishments, of the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. And that is why the church could make evangelism into both a simpler and a more subjective process than that practiced by previous generations. The people believed in sin, but they hadn't come to a profound conviction that *they* were helpless sinners. They believed in Jesus as the Son of God who died for sin, but they hadn't come to cling to him personally and wholly for their own salvation and life. They needed to come to a deep personal conviction of sin and to an experience of God's grace through Christ. They had a Christian mind and conscience, but they didn't have a Christian heart. The need, then, was for some kind of campaign or program that roused and shook people—taking what they already basically believed and making it vivid and personal for them, seeking an individual response of repentance and faith.

Since the end of the "Barbarian Conversion," then, evangelism has shrunk into a program with most of the emphasis being on individual experience. The programs have ranged from preaching-and-music revival seasons, to one-on-one witnessing, to small-group processes. I agree with Lloyd-Jones that there was nothing wrong with these methods as far as they went and in their day. But now *this kind* won't be effectively addressed by that older approach.

No More Magic Bullets

Some might respond that Lloyd-Jones has not been proven right. Isn't evangelical Christianity growing—at least in North America? Look at all the megachurches spouting up! But we must remember that the new situation Lloyd-Jones was describing has spread in stages. It was in Europe before North America. It was in cities before it was in the rest of the society. In the United States it has strengthened in the Northeast and the West Coast first. In many places, especially in the South and Midwest, there is still a residue of more conservative society where people maintain traditional values. Many of these people are therefore still reachable with the fairly superficial, older evangelism programs of the past. And if we are honest, we should admit that many churches are growing large without any evangelism at all. If a church can present unusually good preaching and family ministries and programming, it can easily attract the remaining traditional people and siphon off Christians from all the other churches in a thirty-mile radius. This is easier now than ever because people are very mobile, less tied into their local communities, and less loyal to institutions that don't meet their immediate needs. But despite the growth of megachurches through these dynamics, there is no evidence that the number of churchgoers in the United States is significantly increasing.4

What *is* clear is that the number of secular people professing "no religious preference" is growing rapidly. Michael Wolff, writing in *New York* Magazine, captures the growing divide:

> [There is a] fundamental schism in American cultural, political, and economic life. There's the quicker-growing, economically vibrant . . . morally relativist, urban-oriented, culturally adventuresome, sexually polymorphous, and ethnically diverse nation. . . . And there's the small-town, nuclear-family, religiously oriented, white-centric other America . . . [with] its diminishing cultural and economic force. . . . [T]wo countries. . . .5

So Lloyd-Jones is right that *the demon is in too deep for your ordinary way of doing ministry*—especially in more secular, pluralistic Europe and in the parts of the United States that are similar. In the Christ-haunted places of the West you can still get a crowd without evangelism or with the older approaches. But the traditional pockets of Western society simply are not growing.

I will put my neck on the line and go so far as to say that in my almost thirty-five years in full-time ministry I've seen nearly all the older evangelism programs fade away as they have proved less and less effective. Dwight Moody pioneered the mass preaching crusade in the late nineteenth century, and Billy Graham brought it to its state of greatest efficiency and success, but few are looking in that direction for reaching our society with the gospel.

In the latter part of the twentieth century there were a number of highly effective, short, memorizable, bullet-pointed gospel presentations written for individual lay Christians to use in personal evangelism. Programs were developed for training lay people to use the presentations door-to-door, or in "contact" evangelism in public places, or with visitors to church, or in personal relationships. These have all been extremely helpful, but the churches I know that have used the same program in the same place for decades have seen steadily diminishing fruit.

The next wave of evangelism programming was the "seeker service" model developed by many churches, especially large ones. It is far too early to say that this methodology is finished, and yet younger ministers and church leaders are wont to say that it is too geared to people with a traditional, bourgeoisie, still-Christ-haunted mindset to operate. In many parts of society that kind of person is disappearing.

Today the main programmatic "hope" for churches seeking to be evangelistic is the "Alpha" method which comes out of Holy Trinity Anglican Church in London.6 There are good reasons why this more communal, process-oriented approach has been so fruitful, but I believe that the same principle will hold true, even for Alpha. There is no "magic bullet." You can't simply graft a program (like Alpha or its counterparts) onto your existing church-as-usual. You can't just whip up a new gospel presentation, design a program, hire the staff, and try to get people in the door. *The whole church and everything it does is going to have to change*. The demon's in too deep for the older ways.

In fact, things are more difficult than they were in Lloyd-Jones's lifetime. He was facing what has been called a "modern" culture, and we face a "postmodern" one—making our evangelism methods even more obsolete. It is not my job to look at the "modern vs. postmodern" distinction in any detail, but I think most would agree that the postmodern mindset is associated with at least three problems. First, there's a *truth* problem. All claims of truth are seen not as that which corresponds to reality

but primarily as constraints aimed to siphon power off toward the claimer. Second, there's the *guilt* problem. Though guilt was mainly seen as a neurosis in the modern era (with the reign of Freud), it was still considered a problem. Almost all the older gospel presentations assume an easily accessed sense of guilt and moral shortcoming in the listener. But today that is increasingly absent. Third, there is now a *meaning* problem. Today there's enormous skepticism that texts and words can accurately convey meaning. If we say, "Here is a biblical text and this is what it says," the response will be, "Who are you to say this is the right interpretation? Textual meanings are unstable."

So how do we get the gospel across in the postmodern world? *The gospel* and *the fact that we are now a church on a mission field* will dictate that almost everything the church does will have to be changed. But that is too broad a statement to be of any help, so I will lay out six ways in which the church will have to change. Each of these factors has parallels in the account of Jonah and his mission to the great pagan metropolis of Nineveh.7

Gospel Theologizing

Jonah 1:1–2: "The word of the Lord came to Jonah . . . saying, 'Go to . . . Nineveh and preach'" (niv). For a long time I understood the "gospel" as being just elementary truths, the doctrinal minimum requirement for entering the faith. "Theology," I thought, was the advanced, meatier, deeper, biblical stuff. How wrong I was! *All* theology must be an exposition of the gospel, especially in the postmodern age.

A good example of this is found in Mark Thompson's book, *A Clear and Present Word*.8 Thompson first describes our cultural context in which people believe all meanings are unstable and all texts are indeterminate. He then develops a Christian theology of language. This is certainly not elementary stuff. He begins by looking at the Trinity. Each person—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—seeks not his own glory but only to give glory and honor to the others. Each one is pouring love and joy into the heart of the other. Why would a God like this create a universe? As Jonathan Edwards so famously reasoned, it couldn't be in order to get love and adoration, since as a triune God he already had that in himself.9 Rather, he created a universe to spread the glory and joy he already had. He created other beings to communicate his own love and glory to them and have them communicate it back to him, so they (we!) could step into the great Dance, the circle of love and glory and joy that he already had.

Words and language, then, are ingredients in the self-giving of the divine persons to each other and therefore to us. In creation and redemption God gives us life and being through his Word. We can't live without words, and we can't be saved without *the* Word, Jesus Christ. Human language, then, isn't an insufficient human construct but an imperfectly utilized gift from God. Thompson concludes:

> The [gospel is that the] right and proper judgment of God against our rebellion has not been overturned; it has been exhausted, embraced in full by the eternal Son of God himself. . . .

> God uses words in the service of his intention to rescue men and women, drawing them into fellowship with him and preparing a new creation as an appropriate venue for the enjoyment of that fellowship. In other words, the knowledge of God that is the goal of God's speaking ought never to be separated from the centerpiece of Christian theology; namely, the salvation of sinners.10

This is certainly not elementary theologizing, but a grounding of even the very philosophy and understanding of human language in the gospel. The Word of the Lord (as we see in Jonah 1:1) is never abstract theologizing, but is a life-changing message about the severity and mercy of God.

Why is this so important? First, in a time in which there is so much ignorance of the basic Christian worldview, we have to get to the core of things, the gospel, every time we speak. Second, the gospel of salvation doesn't really relate to theology like the first steps relate to the rest of the stairway but more like the hub relates through the spokes to the rest of the wheel. The gospel of a glorious, other-oriented triune God giving himself in love to his people in creation and redemption and re-creation *is* the core of every doctrine—of the Bible, of God, of humanity, of salvation, of ecclesiology, of eschatology. However, third, we must recognize that in a postmodern society where everyone is against abstract speculation, we will be ignored unless we ground all we say in the gospel. Why? The postmodern era has produced in its citizens a hunger for beauty and justice.

This is not an abstract culture, but a culture of story and image. The gospel is not less than a set of revealed propositions (God, sin, Christ, faith), but it is *more*. It is also a narrative (creation, fall, redemption, restoration.) Unfortunately, there are people under the influence of postmodernism who are so obsessed with narrative *rather* than propositions that they are rejecting inerrancy, are moving toward open theism, and so on. But to some extent they are reacting to abstract theologizing that was not grounded in the gospel and real history. They want to put more emphasis on the actual history of salvation, on the coming of the kingdom, on the importance of community, and on the renewal of the material creation.

But we must not pit systematic theology and biblical theology against each other, nor the substitutionary atonement against the kingdom of God. Look again at the above quote from Mark Thompson and you will see a skillful blending of both individual salvation from God's wrath and the creation of a new community and material world. This world is reborn along with us—cleansed, beautified, perfected, and purified of all death, disease, brokenness, injustice, poverty, deformity. It is not just tacked on as a chapter in abstract "eschatology," but is the only appropriate venue for enjoyment of that fellowship with God brought to us by grace through our union with Christ.

In general, I don't think we've done a good job at developing ways of communicating the gospel that include both salvation from wrath by propitiation *and* the restoration of all things. Today, writing accessible presentations of the gospel should not be the work of marketers but the work of our best theologians.

Gospel Realizing

When God called Jonah to go to Nineveh the first time, Jonah ran in the other direction. Why? The reader assumes it was just fear, but chapter 4 reveals that there was also a lot of hostility in Jonah toward the Assyrians and Ninevites. I believe the reason he did not have pity on them was that he did not sufficiently realize that *he* was nothing but a sinner saved by sheer grace. So he ran away from God—and you know the rest of the story. He was cast into the deep and saved by God from drowning by being swallowed by a great fish. In the second chapter we see Jonah praying, and his prayer ends with the phrase "Salvation is of the Lord !" (2:9). My teacher Ed Clowney used to say that this was the central verse of the Bible. It is an expression of the gospel. Salvation is *from* and *of* the Lord and no one else. Period.

But as a prophet, doesn't Jonah know this? He knows it—and yet he doesn't know it. For eighteen years I lived in apartment buildings with vending machines. Very often you put the coins in but nothing comes out. You have to shake or hit the machine on the side till the coins finally drop down and then out comes the soda. My wife, Kathy, believes this is a basic parable for all ministry. Martin Luther said that the purpose of ministry was not only to make the gospel clear, but to beat it into your people's heads (and your own!) continually.11 You

might be able to get an *A* on your justification-by-faith test, but if there is not radical, concrete growth in humble love toward everyone (even your enemies), you don't *really* know you are a *sinner* saved by grace. And if there is not radical, concrete growth in confidence and joy (even in difficulties), you don't *really* know you are a sinner saved by *grace*.

What must you do if you lack the humility, love, joy, and confidence you need to face the life issues before you? You should not try to move on past the gospel to "more advanced" principles. Rather, you should shake yourself until more of the gospel "coins" drop and more of the fruit of the Spirit comes out. Until you do that, despite your sound doctrine you will be as selfish, scared, oversensitive, insensitive, and undisciplined as everyone else. Those were the attributes characterizing Jonah. If he had known the gospel as deeply as he should have, he wouldn't have reacted with such hostility and superiority toward Nineveh. But the experience in the storm and in the fish brings him back to the foundations, and he rediscovers the wonder of the gospel. When he says, "Salvation is *really* from the Lord!" he wasn't learning something brand new but was rediscovering and realizing more deeply the truth and wonder of the gospel.

If you think you really understand the gospel—you don't. If you think you haven't even begun to truly understand the gospel—you do. As important as our "gospel theologizing" is, it alone will not reach our world. People today are incredibly sensitive to inconsistency and phoniness. They hear what the gospel teaches and then look at our lives and see the gap. Why should they believe? We have to recognize that the gospel is a transforming thing, and we simply are not very transformed by it. It's not enough to say to postmodern people: "You don't like absolute truth? Well, then, we're going to give you even more of it!" But people who balk so much at absolute truth will need to see greater holiness of life, practical grace, gospel character, and virtue, if they are going to believe.

Traditionally, this process of "gospel-realizing," especially when done corporately, is called "revival." Religion operates on the principle: *I obey; therefore I am accepted (by God)*. The gospel operates on the principle: *I am accepted through the costly grace of God; therefore I obey*. Two people operating on these two principles can sit beside each other in church on Sunday trying to do many of the

same things—read the Bible, obey the Ten Commandments, be active in church, and pray—but out of two entirely different motivations. Religion moves you to do what you do out of fear, insecurity, and self-righteousness, but the gospel moves you to do what you do more and more out of grateful joy in who God is in himself. Times of revival are seasons in which many nominal and spiritually sleepy Christians, operating out of the semi-Pharisaism of religion, wake up to the wonder and ramifications of the gospel. Revivals are massive eruptions of new spiritual power in the church through a recovery of the gospel. In his sermon on Mark 9 Lloyd-Jones was calling the church to revival as its only hope. This is not a new program or something you can implement through a series of steps. It is a matter of wonder. Peter says that the angels always long to look into the gospel; they never tire of it (1 Pet. 1:12). The gospel is *amazing* love. *Amazing* grace.

Gospel Urbanizing

Three times Jonah is called to go to Nineveh, which God keeps calling "that *great* city" (1:1; 3:2; 4:11). God puts in front of Jonah the size of it. In Jonah 4:11 he says, "Should not I pity Nineveh, that *great* city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left . . . ?" God's reasoning is pretty transparent. Big cities are huge stockpiles of spiritually lost people. How can you *not* find yourself drawn to them? I had a friend once who used this ironclad theological argument on me: "The cities are places where there are more people than plants, and the countryside is the place where there are more plants than people. Since God loves people far more than plants, he must love the city more than the countryside." That's exactly the kind of logic God is using on Jonah here.

Christians and churches, of course, need to be wherever there are people! And there is not a Bible verse that says Christians must live in the cities. But, in general, the cities are disproportionately important with respect to culture. That is where the new immigrants come before moving out into society. That is where the poor often congregate. That is where students, artists, and young creatives cluster. As the cities go, so goes society. Yet Christians are under-represented in cities for all sorts of reasons.

Many Christians today ask, "What do we do about a coarsening

culture?" Some have turned to politics. Others are reacting against this, saying that "the church simply must be the church" as a witness to the culture, and let the chips fall where they may. James Boice, in his book *Two Cities, Two Loves*, asserts that until Christians are willing to simply live in and work in major cities in at least the same proportions as other groups, we should stop complaining that we are "losing the culture."12

While the small town was the ideal for premodern people, and the suburb was the ideal for modern people, the big city is loved by postmodern people with all its

diversity, creativity, and unmanageability. We will never reach the postmodern world with the gospel if we don't urbanize the gospel and create urban versions of gospel communities as strong and as well-known as the suburban (i.e., the megachurch). What would those urban communities look like? David Brooks has written about "Bobos" who combined the crass materialism of the bourgeoisie with the moral relativism of the bohemians.13 I'd propose that urban Christians would be "reverse Bobos," combining not the worst aspects but the best aspects of these two groups. By practicing the biblical gospel in the city they could combine the creativity, love of diversity, and passion for justice (of the old bohemians) with the moral seriousness and family orientation of the bourgeoisie.

Gospel Communication

As I mentioned above, evangelism in a postmodern context must be much more thorough, progressive, and process-oriented. There are many stages to bring people through who know nothing at all about the gospel and Christianity. Again, we see something of this in the book of Jonah. In Jonah 3:4 we read, "Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'" Notice how little is in that message. Jonah is establishing the reality of divine justice and judgment, of human sin and responsibility. But that's all he speaks of. Later, when the Ninevites repent, the king says: "Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish" (3:9). The king isn't even sure if

God offers grace and forgiveness. It is clear that the Ninevites have very little spiritual understanding here. And though some expositors like to talk about the "revival" in Nineveh in response to Jonah's preaching, it seems obvious that they are not yet in any covenant relationship with God. They have not yet been converted. And yet God responds to that: "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it" (3:10). He doesn't say to them "You are my people; I am your God." There's no saving relationship here—but there is progress! They have one or two very important planks in a biblical worldview, and to God that makes a difference.

At the risk of over-simplification, I'll lay out four stages that people have to go through to come from complete ignorance of the gospel and Christianity to full embrace. I'll call them (1) intelligibility, (2) credibility, (3) plausibility, and (4) intimacy. By "intimacy" I mean leading someone to a personal commitment. The problem with virtually all modern evangelism programs is that they assume listeners come from a Christianized background, and so they very lightly summarize the gospel (often jumping through stages one to three in minutes) and go right to stage "intimacy." But this is no longer sufficient.

"Intelligibility" means to perceive clearly, and I use this word to refer to what Don Carson calls "world-view evangelism." In his essay in *Telling the Truth* Don analyzes Paul's discourse at Athens in Acts 17.14 Paul spends nearly the whole time on God and his sovereignty, a God-centered philosophy of history, and other basic planks in a biblical view of reality. He mentions Jesus only briefly and then only speaks of his resurrection. Many people consider this a failure to preach the gospel. They believe that every time you preach you *must* tell people that they are sinners going to hell,

that Jesus died on the cross for them, and that they need to repent and believe in him. The problem with this is that until people's minds and worldviews have been prepared, they hear you say "sin" and "grace" and even "God" in terms of their own categories. By going too quickly to this overview you guarantee that they will misunderstand what you are saying.

In the early days of Redeemer Presbyterian Church I saw a number of people make decisions for Christ, but in a couple of years, when some desirable sexual partners came along, they simply bailed out of the faith. I was stunned. Then I realized that in our Manhattan culture people believe that truth is simply "what works for me." There is no concept of a Truth (outside the empirical realm) that is real and there no matter what I feel or think. When I taught them that Jesus was the Truth, they understood it through their own categories. There hadn't really been a power-encounter at the worldview level. They hadn't really changed their worldview furniture. When Jesus didn't "work" for them, he was no longer their Truth.

"Credibility" is the area of "defeaters." A defeater is a widely held belief that most people consider common sense but which contradicts some basic Christian teaching.15 A defeater is a certain belief (belief A), that, since it is true, means another belief (belief B) just *can't* be true on the face of it. An example of a defeater belief now is: "I just can't believe there is only one true religion, one way to God." Notice that is not an argument—it's just an assertion. There is almost no evidence you can muster for the statement. It is really an emotional expression, but it is so widely held and deeply felt that for many—even most people—it automatically means orthodox Christianity can't be true. Now in the older Western culture there were very few defeater beliefs out there. The great majority of people believed the Bible, believed in God and heaven and hell, and so on. In the old "Evangelism Explosion" training, I remember there was an appendix of "Objections," but you were directed not to bring these up unless the person you were talking to brought them up first. You were to focus on getting through the presentation.

But today you must have a good list of the ten to twenty basic defeaters out there and must speak to them constantly in all your communication and preaching. You have to go after them and show people that all their doubts about Christianity are really *alternate faith-assertions*. You have to show them what they are and ask them for as much warrant and support for their assertions as they are asking for yours. For example, you must show someone who says, "I think all religions are equally valid; no one's view of spiritual reality is

superior to anyone else's," that that statement is *itself* a faith assertion (it can't be proven) and is itself a view on spiritual reality that he or she thinks is superior to the orthodox Christian view. So the speaker is doing the very thing he is forbidding to others. That's not fair! *That* sort of approach is called "presuppositional apologetics."16 It uncovers the faith assumptions that skeptics smuggle in to their doubts. It will make them begin to think. If you don't do this, people's eyes will just glaze over as you speak. They will tune you out. Nothing you say will sound plausible to them. You can tell them they are sinners and say "the Bible says," but the defeater belief may be deeply embedded in your listeners that the Bible was written by the winners of a power battle with the Gnostic gospel writers, with the result that all your assertions are incredible.

In "Intelligibility" and "Credibility" you are showing listeners the nonnegotiables and angularities of the faith, the truth claims they have to deal with. But in "Plausibility" you enter deeply into their own hopes, beliefs, aspirations, and longings, and you try to connect with them. This is "contextualization," which makes people very nervous in many circles. To some, it sounds like giving people what they want to hear. But contextualization is showing people how the lines of their own lives, the hopes of their own hearts, and the struggles of their own cultures will be resolved in Jesus Christ. David Wells says that contextualization requires

> not merely a practical application of biblical doctrine but a translation of that doctrine into a conceptuality that meshes with the reality of the social structures and patterns of life dominant in our contemporary life. . . .
>
> Where is the line between involvement and disengagement, acceptance and denial, continuity and discontinuity, being "in" the world and not "of" the world?
>
> Contextualization is the process through which we find answer to these questions. The Word of God must be related to our own context. . . . The preservation of its identity [= intelligibility and credibility] is necessary for Christian belief; its contemporary relevance [= plausibility] is required if Christians are to be believable.17

Here is an example. When I talk to someone who insists that no one's view on spiritual reality (faith) is superior to others, I always respond that that *is* a view of spiritual reality and a claim that the world would be a better place if others adopted it. *Every*one unavoidably has "exclusive" views. To insist no one should make a truth claim *is* a truth claim. So the real question is not *Do you think you have the truth?* (Everybody does.) The real question is: *Which* set of exclusive truth claims will lead to a humble, peaceful, non-superior attitude toward people with whom you deeply differ? At the center of the Christian truth claim is a man on a cross, dying for his enemies, praying for their forgiveness. Anyone who thinks out the implications of *that* will be led to love and respect even their opponents.

What am I doing in the above paragraph? I'm taking a major theme of my secular culture—namely, that we live in a pluralistic society of conflict and diversity, and we

need resources for living at peace with one another—and I'm arguing that the claim of religious relativism is not a solution, because it is an exclusive claim to superiority masking itself as something else. Instead I am pointing out that Jesus' dying on the cross best fulfills the yearning of our pluralistic culture for peace and respect among people of different faiths. This is contextualizing—showing the plausibility of the gospel in terms my culture can understand. We have to do this today.

Of course there is always a danger of over-contextualizing, but (as David Wells indicates in the quote above) there is an equal danger of under-contextualization. If you *over-adapt*, you may buy into the idols of the new culture. But if you *under-adapt*, you may be buying into the idols of the older culture. If you are afraid to adapt somewhat to an over-experiential culture, you may be too attached to an overly rational culture. So you have to think it out! To stand pat is no way to stay safe and doctrinally sound. You have to think it out.

Gospel Humiliation

I know this heading sounds pretty strong, but I want to get your attention. In Jonah 3:1–2 we read, "Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.'" In Sinclair Ferguson's little book on Jonah he comments on the broken, humbled prophet who hears the second call to Nineveh and answers it. He says:

> God intends to bring life out of death. We may well think of this as the principle behind all evangelism. Indeed we may even call it the Jonah principle, as Jesus seems to have done. . . . [I]t is out of Christ's weakness that the sufficiency of his saving power will be born. . . . [So] fruitful evangelism is a result of this death-producing principle. It is when we come to share spiritually—and on occasions physically—in Christ's death (cf. Phil. 3:10) that his power is demonstrated in our weakness and others are drawn to him. This is exactly what was happening to Jonah.18

What does this mean? A man recently shared with me how he was trying to talk about his faith with his neighbors, to little avail. But then some major difficulties came into his life, and he began to let his neighbors know how Christ was helping him face them. They were quite interested and moved by this. It was the Jonah principle! As we experience weakness, as we are brought low, Christ's power is more evident in us.

Lloyd-Jones once gave a sermon on Jacob's wrestling with God. In the talk he told a story of a time when he was living in Wales. He was in a gathering of older ministers who were discussing a young minister with remarkable preaching gifts. This man was being acclaimed, and there was real hope that God could use him to renew and revive his church. The ministers were hopeful. But then one of them said to the others: "Well, all well and good, but you know, I don't think he's been humbled yet." And the other ministers looked very grave. And it hit Lloyd-Jones hard (and it hit me hard) that unless something comes into your life that breaks you of your self-righteousness and pride, you may say you believe the gospel of grace but, as we said above, the penny hasn't dropped. You aren't a sign of the gospel yourself. You don't

have the Jonah principle working in you. You aren't a strength-out-of-weakness person. God will have to bring you low if he is going to use you in evangelism.

At the end of the book of Jonah, God gives Jonah a "gourd" (kjv) that grows a vine and gives him shade, but then a desert wind blasts the vine and ruins it. Jonah becomes disconsolate. John Newton wrote a hymn largely based on this incident.

I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of His salvation know,
And seek, more earnestly, His face.

I hoped that in some favored hour,
At once He'd answer my request;
and by His love's constraining pow'r,
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart;
And let the angry pow'rs of hell
Assault my soul in every part.

Yea more, with His own hand
He seemed intent to aggravate my woe;
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

"Lord why is this," I trembling cried,
"Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?"
"'Tis in this way," the Lord replied,
"I answer prayer for grace and faith."

"These inward trials I employ,
From self and pride to set thee free
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,
*That thou may'st find thy all in Me."*19

Gospel Incarnation

I believe Jonah is a setup for the amazing letter from God to the exiles of Babylon in Jeremiah 29. The Jews had been living in their nation-state in which everyone was a believer, but when they arrive in Babylon God tells them to move into that pagan city, filled with unbelievers and uncleanness, and work for its peace and prosperity—its *shalom*. He challenges them to use their resources to make the city a great place for everyone—believers and unbelievers—to live. This is not just supposed to be a calculated thing or a thing of mere duty. He calls them to pray for it, which is to love it. This was the city that had destroyed their homeland! Yet that is the call. God outlines a relationship to pagan culture. His people are neither to *withdraw* from it nor *assimilate* to it. They are to remain *distinct but engaged*. They are to be different,

but out of that difference they are to sacrificially serve and love the city where they are exiles. And if their city prospers, then they too will prosper.

This is really astonishing, but the book of Jonah gets us ready for all this. Jonah is called to go to a pagan city to help it avoid destruction, but he is too hostile toward them to want to go. He runs away, but God puts him on a boat filled with pagans anyway. There Jonah is asleep in the boat during the storm. He is awakened by the sailors, who tell him to call on his God to ask him to keep the boat from sinking. They ask him to use his relationship to God to benefit the public good. The Scottish writer Hugh Martin wrote a commentary on this text and called this chapter "The World Rebuking the Church."20 Eventually Jonah goes to Nineveh—but when God turns away from destroying them, Jonah is furious. This time God rebukes him for not caring about the whole city and its welfare. Jonah 4:10–11: "You pity the plant. . . . Should not *I* pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

This is a picture of the church's problem in a postmodern world. We simply don't like the unwashed pagans. Jonah *went* to the city but didn't *love* the city. Likewise, we don't love the postmodern world in the way we should. We disdain these people who don't believe in Truth. We create our subculture and we invite people to join us inside, but we

don't take our time, gifts, and money and pour ourselves out in deeds of love and service to our city. Does the world recognize our love for them? Are we the kind of church of which the world says: *We don't share a lot of their beliefs, but I shudder to think of this city without them. They are such an important part of the community. They give so much! If they left we'd have to raise taxes because others won't give of themselves like those people do.* "Though they accuse you . . . they . . . see your good deeds and glorify God" (1 Pet. 2:12, niv; cf. Matt. 5:16).

Where do you get the courage and power to live like that? Well, here. Centuries after Jonah, there was another sleeper in a storm—Jesus Christ (Mark 4). And he was surrounded by his disciples who, like the sailors, were terrified. And in exactly the same way they woke him up and said, "Don't you care? Do something or we will drown!" So Jesus waved his hand, calmed the sea, and everyone was saved. So for all the similarities, the stories of Jonah and Jesus are very different at the end. Whereas Jonah was sacrificed and thrown into the storm of wrath so the sailors could be saved, Jesus wasn't sacrificed. But wait. On the cross, Jesus *was* thrown into the real storm, the ultimate storm. He went under the wrath of God and *was* drowned in order that we could be saved.

Do you see that? If you do, then you have *both* the strength and the weakness, the power and the pattern, to pour yourself out for your city. Ultimately, the gospel is not a set of principles but is Jesus Christ himself. See the supremacy of Christ in the gospel. Look at him, and if you see him bowing his head into that ultimate storm, for us, then we can be what we should be.

Conclusion

Since we began looking at Mark 9 we should not forget that "this kind" of demon "only comes out through prayer." Lloyd-Jones applies this to the church today by insisting that it needs a comprehensive spiritual transformation if we are going to evangelize our world with the gospel. There's a (probably apocryphal) story about Alexander the Great, who had a general whose daughter was getting married. Alexander valued this soldier greatly and offered to pay for the wedding. When the general gave Alexander's steward the bill, it was absolutely enormous.

The steward came to Alexander and named the sum. To his surprise Alexander smiled and said, "Pay it! Don't you see—by asking me for such an enormous sum he does me great honor. He shows that he believes I am both rich *and* generous."

Are we insulting God by our small ambitions and low expectations for evangelism today?

Thou art coming to a King,
Large petitions with thee bring;
For His grace and power are such,
*None can ever ask too much.*21

Footnotes

1. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Revival* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1987), 9, 13–15.

2. See Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986) and *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

3. Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

4See, for example, http://ww.theamericanchurch.org/facts/1.htm.

5. Michael Wolff, "The Party Line," *New York* Magazine (Feb. 26, 2001): 19. Online at http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/media/columns/medialife/4407/index1.html.

6See www.alpha.org.

8Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

9See the singular "The Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8, *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

10Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word*, 56, 65.

11. Martin Luther "This is the truth of the gospel. It is also the principal article of all Christian doctrine, whereby the knowledge of all goodness consisteth. Most necessary it is therefore, that we should know this article well, teach it to others and beat it into their heads continually."

12James Montgomery Boice, *Two Cities, Two Loves: Christian Responsibility in a Crumbling Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 165ff.

13David Brooks, *Bobos In Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

15For more on this, see my article "Defeating Defeater Beliefs: Leading the Secular to Christ"(http://www.redeemer2.com/themovement/issues/2004/oct/deconstructing.html), as well as my forthcoming book, tentatively titled *Doubting Your Doubts* (New York: Penguin-Dutton).

14D. A. Carson, "Athens Revisited," in *Telling the Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 384–98.

16For an introduction, see John Frame's *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994).

17David F. Wells, “An American Evangelical Theology: The Painful Transition from Theoria to Praxis,” in *Evangelicalism and Modern America,* ed. George M. Marsden (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 90, 93.

18Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Man Overboard* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1981), 70–71.

19John Newton, “I Asked the Lord That I Might Grow” (1779).

20Hugh Martin, *The Prophet Jonah* (1866; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1978).

21John Newton, “Come, My Soul, Thy Suit Prepare” (1779).