

(Postmodern Times) First Steps Towards Regrouping

by D.A. Carson

Christians should be neither modernists nor postmodernists, but rather something else, and should recognize the strengths in postmodernism while also exposing its antithesis.

Duration: 1:19:56

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-2, Exodus 20:3-17, Isaiah 53:5, Matthew 28:19-20, Luke 24:27, John 1:1-5, Romans 3:23-24

Topics: "Postmodern"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of not only explaining the immediate text of the Bible but also tying it to the bigger picture of the Bible's storyline. He highlights the need to regain this approach in evangelical preaching, especially in multicultural contexts where biblical literacy may be lacking. The speaker also emphasizes the need to establish agreement on the problem of sin before presenting the solution of trusting in Jesus for abundant life. He warns that preaching without this understanding is a waste of time and a distortion of the truth.

Transcript

Let us bow together in prayer. Our Father, as we begin to think our way through the issues of the changes in our culture, give us, we pray, a heart for men and women. We can have all the understanding in the world, but if we do not love our neighbors, it will avail nothing.

And so grant, Lord God, to us the courage and the compassion and the empathy and the boldness to speak what we can speak, to say what we can say, even when we don't know very well how to proceed, so that even out of our fumbings we will learn better how to share the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ with a generation that needs so badly to hear it. Grant to us acuity of mind and heart now as we think through these things. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Now this morning I spent my time largely in going through the cultural changes in the Western world that have left us with a population largely biblically illiterate and largely bought into a post-modern epistemology, an epistemology that is very uncertain about the possibility of any objective truth, that promotes relativism with a changed view of tolerance and so forth. I will assume now, for our purposes this afternoon, the definitions of modernism and post-modernism I gave this morning. I don't want to repeat that sort of ground.

If I had one single thesis this afternoon, it would be this, that Christians should be neither modernists nor post-modernists, but something else, and then the preliminary steps toward getting there. The reason I say that is because there is quite a lot of literature that's now beginning to arise that is making people so frightened of post-modernism that it is turning the Christian community into knee-jerk reactionaries. We don't like what's going on, so we put the gear shift firmly in reverse and tromp down on the throttle.

Anything that is traditional and old-fashioned is good by definition, and anything that is contemporary and post-modern is bad by definition. As a result of the literature that has come out in the last little while, I've often found quoted a poem by William Yates, even though it's now 60 years old, it is thought very much to capture the spirit of the age. Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold.

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned. The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.

Thus out of this comes a kind of almost council of despair. Those more eschatologically inclined simply tell us we're living in the last days. Those less eschatologically inclined simply get on with their living.

What do you expect? It's a rotten generation and we'll just have to sit around and wait for revival. I want to begin this afternoon then by offering you a number of points that start charting a way out of the morass that I tried to describe this morning. These are still not Biblical responses.

I will deal with Biblical responses from Scripture tomorrow morning and tomorrow afternoon. These are still orientations informed by a Biblical mind, in line with Scripture, but they're still an analytic, trying to understand what's going on, but now looking at things less from a descriptive framework than from a larger Christian confessional frame. My first point is this.

It is absolutely essential that Christians recognize the strengths in postmodernism. After all the nasty things that I said about postmodernism this morning, you might think it's a bit presumptuous to suppose that there are any strengths, but there are all kinds of strengths in postmodernism for which we should be profoundly grateful, and it is worth thinking some of these things through. For a start, modernism, as we saw, relied enormously on the autonomy of human reason to find the truth.

But do Christians want to go down that track? Don't we recognize how many other ingredients there are in understanding things? Don't we insist, for example, on the entailment of the Fall for our reasoning functions? Thus, theologians speak of the noetic effects of sin, that is, the effects on the mind of sin. So many of our judgments are constrained by our biases and our hates and our sins, our rejection of God, our vaunted autonomy. We're not simply rational beings working with the autonomy of a well-programmed computer without moral recourse.

Who we are, what we've done, our guilt, whom we've slept with, what we've stolen, how we've lied, all affect how we handle truth claims, don't they? Doesn't the Bible insist that the natural man doesn't understand the things of God? In one sense, we go even farther than the postmodernists. The postmodernists say, listen, we're finite. Therefore, there is no secure base of information.

There is no secure knowledge. We're finite. All our knowing is necessarily circumscribed and relative.

We say, yes, there's great truth to that. We go further yet. We're not only finite, we're perverted and condemned.

So you see, there is a sense in which Christians want to get on the postmodern bandwagon and say, you've got some genuine insight there. In fact, you don't even go far enough. You don't recognize our guilt, our corruption, as well as our finitude.

Moreover, even in this postcolonial generation where we're becoming much more aware of different stances, don't we know now almost intuitively that Christians from around the world do look at certain things in a different way? Don't we know that? I worked for 10 years part-time with the World Evangelical Fellowship. Part of my job was to bring together people from evangelical scholars and leaders from around the world, different cultures and backgrounds, denominational backgrounds, language groups, races, continents, and we'd work on a variety of projects. We put out five books together.

In each case, people had to write their chapters in advance and they all came to me and then they got circulated to everybody. Then we held a conference and we all criticized everybody else's work and then they got revised and I edited them down. What was very interesting in that framework, for example, was just watching people interact with one another from different cultural backgrounds.

Even how they enter a room is interesting in an international conference. In comes someone from Mexico or Spain or something like that and it's big, big hugs and brother, brother, slap, slap. Then off in the corner is the Englishman in his tweed, have we been introduced? That's a direct quote.

That is not even a joke. That was a direct quote to one of these Spaniards who was bearing down on him. Then, of course, in comes the Indian with full of this and then the Japanese are figuring out how far they're supposed to bow to keep the pecking order right.

In comes the German and he's got to shake everybody's hand on the way in and he's got to shake everybody's hand on the way out. In comes Ed Clowney from America, hi everybody, sorry I'm late. You know the American show.

It's culture, isn't it? Then in the arguments and the debates and the discussions, I can remember one day a Japanese brother by the name of Masao Wainuma saying almost nothing for a long period of time. Because I was in the chair, I said to him, brother Wainuma, do you have some wisdom you would like to share with the rest of us? He said something like, well, I am not certain but it appears to me that it might be possible perhaps to read this text in a slightly different way. I would not wish to criticize the insights and opinions of others but it seems to me that one might perhaps understand it in such and such a way.

The brother from Norway who shall remain nameless said, oh no, that's silly, that's not what the text says at all. Which of course scared my poor Japanese compatriot into approximately 60 minutes of absolute silence as he pondered dutifully what kind of barbarian crowd he had fallen into. Yet in all fairness the Norwegian was not being rude, he was merely speaking out of the framework of a North European propensity for debate.

Now we know that before we even start theological discussions, don't we? So that if you talk with Titienou from French West Africa for example, inevitably he sees things much more tightly tied to community with much less individualism in his bias. He's much more interested in the demonic world and the spiritual world along those fronts than most of us are intrinsically attuned to here. And so he brings a different set of biases and agendas to the table than the typical Westerner does.

Now is he all wrong? Are we all wrong? Most of us have become aware of the fact that we bring different perspectives to the table, do we not? You see postmodernism is not entirely incorrect. Now clearly postmodernism that runs amok and then finally says there is no place for truth at all is running into problems. But insofar as postmodernism begins to kill and question the sheer arrogance of modernism, it's got to be a good thing.

You see there is a sense nowadays in which Christians can get back into certain kinds of debate simply by saying, say, what are you criticizing my point of view for? There was a time when you did so because you thought you were intrinsically better, you were a modernist. But doesn't postmodern bias mean that every group has the right at least to get back into the debate? Now of course rigorous postmodern arguments will say you're allowed in only provided you're willing to say that no group is necessarily wrong. And at some point then again Christians are having difficulty with postmodernism.

But nevertheless you can understand how it is possible to get back into some debates in university campuses and elsewhere from which we were shut out a bare 20 years ago. Now it is important for us to see that Christians should be neither modernist and therefore, epistemologically speaking, relying far too much on human reason and human autonomy, nor postmodernist and therefore drifting far too much toward endless pluralism and relativism. Second observation.

Practical experience shows that accurate communication is possible. Practical experience shows that accurate communication is possible. Now this is still not a theoretical response.

This is merely an appeal to pragmatics. But it's worth thinking about for a bit. When I wrote the book *The Gaggling of God*, which deals with this subject at length, I read about 1,100 books and articles in preparation for writing that beast.

And I made it a point of reading a fair number of reviews of the most important books as well. And then I discovered that sometimes there were letters from the authors of the books to the reviewers who claimed that the reviewers had misrepresented their positions. Now that was very interesting.

Here were these postmodernists telling their reviewers that they were morally at fault if they did not accurately represent them, which presupposes that they expected the reviewers to understand what they said. You see, one of the things that has happened in literary criticism related to postmodernism is this. At one time, it was understood that the authority of a text lay in the author.

What did the author mean? Now the danger, of course, with stressing the author and not the text, is sometimes when you start saying what the author really meant to say was, and you appeal beyond the text, behind the text, to some sort of knowledge of the author which isn't represented in the text. Now, I'm quite prepared to say what did Paul mean by a passage if you're looking at the passage to figure out what he meant, or if you're looking at other things that Paul said along the same lines elsewhere in his corpus of words to find the mind of Paul. But to look at a text and say, well, it says this, but what he really meant was that, by appealing to some mind that you have access to without appealing to text, is a bit dangerous.

But nevertheless, we really did want to find out what an apostle meant. In some sense, we claimed that we could commune with the apostle and share his thoughts and think his thoughts afresh by virtue of the text which he has left for us. So then we move from the apostle, or from the writer, to the text.

A text is autonomous. Once it begins to move out there, it begins to mean different things in different crowds in different centuries. The text becomes autonomous from the apostle.

Then it was argued, under the impact of postmodernism, that real meaning is not in the text because people find different meanings in the text. How can you speak of the meaning in the text? The real meaning is found in the reader, in the knower, in the interpretive community. And different knowers, different readers, different interpreters, different interpretive communities, they find different meanings in the text.

So the meaning must really be in them. It's not in the text. The text is merely a trigger for generating meanings.

It's something that you bounce off, do you see? But the meaning is here. It's not that there's no meaning in the text, it's that there's a superfluity of meanings in the text which are all legitimized merely by appeal to the reader and his or her community. So we move from the author, to the text, to the reader.

But here now are these postmodern writers who are being reviewed, who are resenting it, when the reviews misrepresent them. And they would actually say things like, that's not what I said, or that's not what I meant. Which shows that when it comes to their own writing, they want this material to reflect their thoughts, and they presuppose that accurate communication is possible.

Now, I came across this in a rather brutal way about twelve years ago, when the seminary where I teach, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in North Chicago, linked up with some of the other seminaries in the metro area. We have thirteen seminaries in metro Chicago, most of which are not evangelical by any description. And we thought, as an experiment, as no part of the agenda, no part of the academic curriculum, we would try for one term to run an evening school course on hermeneutics, if you please, where some of the major schools would each have a few hours to defend their particular stance.

So there was a Roman Catholic lecturer from St. Mary's in the Lake, and there was a rather liberal Lutheran from Seabury Western, and there was somebody from McCormick, and so on. And they each had their own three or four hours to talk about hermeneutics as they understood it. And I was the evangelical.

So I did my bit. And this goes back ten or twelve years, when I knew even less about this subject than I know now. And I rambled on for my two hours, and then we threw it open for question and answer.

And there was a woman doctoral student there from one of the more liberal schools, and she said basically, Dr. Carson, quite frankly, I disagree with just about everything you've said. You're old-fashioned, you're steeped in modernism, you're bigoted, you really don't understand contemporary criticism. And in part, she was right.

At that point, I hadn't done enough work on the subject, I'm quite sure. But I tried to argue my corner, my patch, to the best of my ability. I don't think I was quite as bad as she said.

And she tried to convince me, and I tried to convince her, and I wasn't getting anywhere. It was getting frustrating. And then, in a moment of sheer intellectual perversity on my part, I said to her, I think I understand where you're coming from now.

You're using irony in order to affirm the objectivity of truth. She said, that's exactly what I'm not saying. I'm not saying anything like that.

You're twisting what I'm saying. I said, this is fantastic. To irony, you are adding passion in order to affirm the objectivity of truth.

That's not what I'm saying at all. She blew up, and I did it again a third time, which was really quite unkind. And she was absolutely explosive.

And when she finally came down, I said to her, but that's how I'm reading you. You could see her tripping over her own Adam's apple. She couldn't speak, she couldn't respond, there was no response to make by her own field of discourse.

And then I had to apologize to her. I had to apologize for two reasons. First, because I had made a monkey out of her in front of the rest of the class, which you shouldn't do as a teacher.

That's not a very good thing to do. And the second reason was because I lied. That is to say, it's not how I read her.

I just said I did, in order to gain a certain point. But my point nevertheless was valid. It was merely a pedagogical device to try to get the point across.

Namely, that although I hadn't read her that way, her instantaneous defense was that was not what she meant. I was twisting what she was saying. She expected, in our confluence of discussion, to have a kind of integrity in which I would represent her truly.

When it came to her own text, she was prepared to appeal not only to her text, but to authorial intent, her intent, which I pointed out. And then I said, why can't you extend the same courtesy to the Apostle Paul? Or to God, if he's a talking God? You see, the problem is that whatever insight there is in postmodernism, and there is quite a bit, nevertheless, practical experience shows that some form of communication that is understood from one person to another person is possible. Therefore, any form of postmodernism that tries to exclude it has got something theoretically wrong with it.

You see, it is important to say that. It doesn't work. It's got some truth to it, and we have to find out what that truth is and why it's there.

But at the same time, it's got something profoundly wrong to it, or else you wouldn't have all these book authors getting upset by their reviews. I have yet to meet a writer of a postmodern book who, when his or her book has been badly handled by a review, has simply said, well, that's what one should expect, of course. We all have different points of view.

Third point. At the heart of all radical postmodern thought, without exception as far as I can see, at the heart of all radical postmodern thought, lies one indefensible antithesis. And if you expose that antithesis, you unmask the pretensions of postmodernism.

Let me explain what that antithesis is. That antithesis is either you understand something absolutely and exhaustively, or you are lost in a sea of relativism. That's the antithesis.

Either you understand something absolutely and exhaustively, you understand it truly, or you are lost in a sea of relativity, because if you can't understand it exhaustively and truly, then surely everything is relative

in your understanding. Do you see? That's the antithesis. Now if you accept that antithesis, if you buy into that antithesis, you will always lose every debate to a postmodernist.

They will tie you up every time. Conversely, if you expose that antithesis for what it is, you can confound the postmodernist. Now let me give you some explanations so that you will see this, some illustrations so that you understand how this works.

There was another French deconstruction scholar by the name of Paul Daman. He's dead now. He taught for many years in the U.S. In one of his books, he draws an illustration from Archie Bunker.

Are you all blessed with intimate knowledge of Archie Bunker? Is this a further sign of the triumph of American imperialism and its culture? Archie Bunker, for those elite of the elect among you who have never seen it, was a TV sitcom a few years ago, now into reruns on remote channels, in which Archie is the quintessential right-wing redneck, and his wife is the quintessential twit. And they have a daughter, and Archie hates everybody. He hates women, he hates blacks, he hates intellectuals.

And the reason why the program is so funny is precisely because the way it's written, you're taking the Mickey out of this sort of right-wing attitude all the time. And it really was quite a clever program, and Carol O'Connor is a pretty good actor. In one of the segments Paul Daman describes, Edith, Archie's wife, comes to him and says, Archie, do you want your bowling shoes laced up or down? Because she's just been cleaning them.

In Archie's world, a man never cleans his own shoes. That's a woman's job. And so she says, Archie, do you want your bowling shoes laced up or down? And he says, ah, what's the difference? And she says, well, Archie, the difference is that if you lace them down, you start from the top of the holes and you go down, and if you start from the bottom, then you're really lacing them up, Archie.

And you see everybody's killing themselves laughing, because, in Paul Daman's words, when Archie Bunker says, ah, what's the difference? What he means is, to quote Paul Daman, is, I don't give a damn. That's what he means. Well, she understands him to mean, ah, what's the difference between lacing them up and down? I need an explanation.

So she gives him the explanation. And as a result, Paul Daman says, and I quote, this example, he says, shows that even in the simplest communication, there are, quote, vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration. Now, you have to be able to read such stuff to understand post-modern books, which is already a bit daunting.

Vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration. Vertiginous means steep, as in a vertiginous cliff. Vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration, that is, of it being unclear whether it's referring to this or to that.

It could refer to this, it could refer to that, and in every even simple communication, there are these horrible possibilities of misunderstanding whether it's referring to this or referring to that. Now, when I first read this clause from Paul Daman, I closed the book with my mouth half open, and I think I said something profound, like, give me a break. Because, at the end of the day, who didn't understand what Archie was talking about? I mean, Edith didn't understand, but she's not supposed to, she's a twit, that's why the program's funny.

On the other hand, the whole audience understood, that's why I was laughing. It was funny precisely because everybody understood that there was a double reference. The only other person who didn't understand was Paul Daman, do you see? So that you can see, nevertheless, the form of the argument that is actually operating.

He is trying to show all the time that even in the simplest communications, you either have to understand something exhaustively and perfectly and absolutely and truly, otherwise you're stuck in another camp in a sea of endless referential aberration, in a sea of endless relativity. You're in one camp or you're in the other, do you see? And this point is pushed again and again and again. Now let me give another illustration.

Picture Johnny, let's say seven years old, brought up in a nice Christian confessional home in a nice Christian confessional church. And he's been duly catechized in his youth and he knows a lot of Bible verses by heart and has sung Bible choruses and so on. And you visit Johnny in his home and you say, Johnny, does God love you? And Johnny, being who Johnny is from his background, says, well, yes, of course God loves me.

How do you know God loves you? God loves you. And he thinks about it for a bit and then he says, Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. So the Bible tells you that he loves you? Yes.

Where? Now because this kid really has been well taught, he thinks a bit more and if you remember it's a Bible verse that he's learned and he says, well, John 3.16 says that God so loved the world that he gave his son, so I'm part of the world, he must love me too. Now my question is this, does Johnny understand John 3.16? Does he understand, for example, that the word world in John 3.16, God so loved the world, is the word cosmos, which in dominant John usage refers not to the world as a big place, but to the world as a bad place. It's the fallen, broken moral order in rebellion against God.

God's love is remarkable in John 3.16, not because the world is so big, but because the world is so bad. God loves this broken, disgusting world so much that he gives his son. Does Johnny understand that? Has he ever done a word study on agapao, the Greek God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten, in the King James Version, or his one and only in the NIV? Does he know that the problem is connected with monogamies and how to translate it? Has he thought through what that same chapter says that bear twenty verses on, verse 36, the wrath of God abides in him, so that he somehow thought through God's wrath and God's love? Has he thought through the doctrine of propitiation? John uses that word in 1 John 2 too.

Does he understand that? Is he more likely to think of God's love more or less as his mummy's and daddy's love, you know, with big hugs and cuddles before he goes to bed? Tell me, does Johnny understand John 3.16? Now the kind of questions that I've just aired for you would be precisely the kinds of questions that a postmodernist would ask. And you are supposed to answer the question. Of course he doesn't understand it.

But I would answer, of course he understands it. He understands it partially, imperfectly, but he understands it truly, in the sense that that text really does answer the question whether or not God loves him. After all, that text is not talking about the sex life of sea turtles.

It's not talking about the virgin birth. It's not talking about Gideon. It's talking about God's love for people, of whom he is one.

He understands the text. He doesn't understand it exhaustively, but he does understand it. Well now picture Johnny 20 years later.

He goes from high school, he's soundly converted, goes off to college, does a first class degree somewhere in history, and then lands up at a good seminary, does graduate work, and eventually does a PhD in the theology of John's Gospel. And now he spends years of his life writing learned tomes on John's Gospel. Does he understand John 3.16 now? Well, one would hope so.

But he doesn't understand it exhaustively or perfectly. He would be the first to acknowledge how much he doesn't know, how many layers of depth there are. And moreover, when you start asking whether you understand something, you have to ask how you understand that thing in relationship to all the other things.

Does he understand that thing perfectly and exhaustively in relationship to all the other things in the Bible, for example? He understands a fair bit of it, a lot more than he understood when he was seven. But does he understand it exhaustively? No, he doesn't. Fast forward 20 billion years into eternity.

Does he understand it perfectly then? No, he doesn't. Now you're going too far. What about 1 Corinthians 13? Now we know in part, but then shall we know even as also we are known? Doesn't that mean that one day we'll understand things perfectly? No.

The point of 1 Corinthians 13 is that now we know through a glass darkly, that is by mediation. We have mediated knowledge. But God knows us immediately.

His knowledge of us is immediate. But after Christ has returned, then our knowledge of him, our knowledge of God, will also be immediate. It will not be mediated knowledge through means, or through scripture, or through rites, or through the Lord's Supper.

We'll have an immediate knowledge of God. But we will never have an omniscient knowledge. For omniscience is an incommunicable attribute of God.

That is to say, it is an attribute of God that cannot be shared by non-God. Human beings, even glorified human beings, will never be omniscient. We will never know everything.

Because only God knows everything. So that if you are making it a condition of knowing anything truly, that you know everything exhaustively, you are making a condition that you be God, which is the supreme hubris, is the supreme arrogance. All you are saying, in effect, is that human beings can never know anything, which is demonstrably not true.

Do you see? You must destroy that antithesis. The antithesis, once again, is the insistence that either you can know something absolutely, and truly, and exhaustively, or you are lost in a sea of absolute relativity. If you buy into that antithesis, if you say that the antithesis itself is correct, then you will lose to postmodernists every time.

Because it is very easy to show that human beings don't know anything, exhaustively and absolutely. Not anything. Do you see? If, on the other hand, you destroy that antithesis and you say, listen, it is possible for human beings to know some things, truly, even if nothing, exhaustively.

It is possible to know things in any useful sense of know, even though you don't have the knowledge of omniscience. Then, postmodernists cannot stand on their ground any longer. Then, in the fourth place, there are models that glean the best from this new hermeneutic, from this postmodernism, without destroying all objective truth.

Let me suggest two or three of them. One model that has been proposed first came from a philosopher of science called Karl Popper, but it has been adapted in a number of ways. I hate to do this to you on a Saturday afternoon, but go back with me for a moment to high school algebra.

You know how in high school algebra they are always afflicting you with x-y axes, a cross set of bars. That is your x-axis and that is your y-axis. In this x-y axis, a line up here, in this quadrant, that comes down and approaches the x-axis and gets closer and closer and closer, but never ever touches it.

That is called an asymptote. Does anybody remember that from high school? That is called an asymptote. What it is doing is it is making an asymptotic approach.

It is called the x-asymptote. Now then, it never touches, but it does get closer and closer. There is a sense in which human knowledge belonging to a finite person makes an asymptotic approach to God's knowledge in some small area.

You see, to take our instance of Johnny a few moments ago, when he is seven years old, thinking about what John 3.16 means, he is about here. That is, his knowledge is a long way removed from the baseline. When he is twenty, it is about here.

Fifty billion years into eternity is very close indeed in terms of what he understands of that passage, but it never ever touches the line. On the other hand, that is a bit different from saying that he is over here in this quadrant, or down here in this quadrant. As soon as he is right off the map, he is nowhere on the asymptote at all.

Do you see? That is only a model. But the point is that there are models like that that do usefully explain how human beings can be said to know some things truly, even when they don't know things exhaustively. Or to take that hermeneutical circle that we dealt with before, you see, you can speak of going around and around and around and around, but you can also speak, if you prefer, of a hermeneutical spiral that is getting in closer and closer and closer and closer to the subject, so that as you come to a text the first time, you might be a long way off, but you get it the second time, and then the third time, and then the fourth time, and the fifth time, and gradually you get closer.

Doesn't that conform with your experience? You break into a new subject, maybe you've never ever studied electronics before, and it suddenly comes into your head that you would like to study some electronics, so you take an evening course at the local college on electronics, and when you first start reading this stuff, and you're getting these mathematical formulas thrown at you, and you're finding out about resistors, and then you're finding about transistors, and then you're finding out about chips and how they make them, and silicon, and how many transistors, in effect, you can put on the chip the size of a thumbnail, and what they do, and so forth. It's all daunting language, it's a bit frightening, and so forth. Or perhaps you take a course in economics, and they're talking all kinds of technical terminology that is really quite off-putting.

Or a course in cooking, it doesn't really matter what the subject is, if it's your first time at it, it controls you, and then you get into it a bit. Two or three years down the road, you've taken several courses, and you go back to look at the first book that you've had in the area. And now you pick it up, and it is so obvious, it is such a breeze, you can't believe you struggled with it.

We see it in our kids, don't they? You watch your kid, the first time handling his first calculus problem, and it's pretty terrifying to watch them. And then once they've had two or three years of calculus, a little bit of differentiation's not any problem, is it? And that's the way people learn. That is to say, instead of being out there all the time at this equidistant place from understanding, you actually do, as you hit a text again and again, spiral in and spiral in, and spiral in, and spiral in, so that if you keep reading the Bible, and reading the Bible, and reading the Bible, and reading the Bible, especially if you have good Bible teaching associated with it, and access to good literature, and commentaries, and this sort of thing, then God help us.

After 20 years, we should know a little more than what we knew when we started, and 20 years after that, we should know a little bit more again, and so forth. Is that so hard to understand as a concept? That doesn't mean we understand the Bible perfectly, or exhaustively, or omnisciently, but we can understand some parts of it truly. Just because I cannot give you an exhaustive exposition of the doctrine of the love of God, it doesn't mean I can't say some true things.

Now, let me take that example and push that one a little bit further, too. What does it mean to say that God loves me? I have to give some lectures at another seminary in the new year, in February, and I've chosen to give four talks on the subject, The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God. The reason why the doctrine of the love of God is difficult is twofold.

First, because nowadays, so many people in our culture, if they believe that God is at all, believe that God is a God of love, and as a result, the whole notion has become sentimentalized. In the Puritan period, people believed that God was a God of justice, and therefore of wrath. It was harder for them to believe that God was a God of love.

Nowadays, they believe that God is a God of love. It's harder for them to believe that God is a God of justice, and as a result, the whole notion has become sentimentalized. But there's another reason.

Another reason why it's a difficult doctrine is because now that the doctrine of the love of God has become sentimentalized, almost all of the passages about the love of God are read as if they were on a flat plane, that is, as if they're referring to the same thing. But in fact, you can isolate five or six quite different ways that the Bible speaks about the love of God. For example, God is the kind of God who loves everyone, sinner and righteous person alike.

He's the kind of God who sent his reign upon the just and upon the unjust. He's the kind of God who yearns for sinners, who says, turn, turn, why will you die? The Lord has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. On the other hand, he's also the kind of God of whom it is said that he chose Israel simply because he loved him.

That is, God's love in that place can be selective. It is an electing love. Or in Malachi, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated, even before either child had done any good thing or any bad thing.

It was a selective love. Or then there's another kind of way that the Bible speaks about the love of God. For example, in Jude, verse 21, keep yourselves in the love of God.

Well, that's not his generalizing love for all people in the sense that he sends the reign and the gifts of common grace. You don't keep yourself in that love, you're in it whether you like it or not. Nor is it God's elective love, which is secure from before the foundation of the world.

What is it? Well, that kind of passage speaks of the kind of love that you get in either a covenantal relationship or a family relationship between a father and a child. It's taught elsewhere. In John's Gospel, for example, Jesus insists that the father loves him because he always does the things that please him.

In other words, the part the love of the father for the son is maintained by the obedience of the son. And in exactly the same way, we as the children of God, now that we have been redeemed and have entered into a relationship with him, we are to keep ourselves in the love of God by our obedience. But that doesn't mean that somehow all of God's purposes for election will be vitiated if we sin.

Do you see? In other words, the Bible speaks of the love of God in different ways which are dependent upon the context. And if you take any one of those ways and absolutize it and read all of the other ways in the light of that one passage all the time, you will soon make shipwreck of your faith. You will have nonsense for your theology.

And I'm afraid a lot of people do in that respect precisely because they don't listen enough to what the Bible says in diverse fashions about the love of God. Do you see? Now then, what I have just said about the love of God is not complicated. It's things that the Church has confessed for years.

It's understood for a long time. We just happen to have forgotten a lot of those sorts of things. But that isn't all that the Bible says about the love of God.

I think what I've said about the love of God in the last five minutes is true. But it misses some things. There are other ways that the Bible speaks about the love of God.

Moreover, it misses the component of sheer emotional depth. If I were preaching about the love of God, I would not simply give you the analysis I've given and no more. I would try to paint it as a picture so you would feel it.

Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned he stood, sealed my pardon with his blood. Hallelujah, what a Savior! For it is always only one notch off blasphemy to talk of the love of God in merely analytic terms, isn't it? The fact of the matter is, there's so much the Bible says about the love of God. But on the other hand, if you say, God really does love me and has given his Son for me and I have trusted him, you have said something true, haven't you? Even if it is not exhaustive? Even if it does not put in the fine print? Please turn to slide B now.

Now in that sense then, you may approach the subject asymptotically. You may spiral into it so that as you study more about the love of God over the years, you will know more about it, appreciate more about it intellectually, but also experience more of it. As you experience God's love in the hard times, in the difficult times, through your first bereavement and your second bereavement and through the vicissitudes of life, you grow in your grasp and appreciation of the love of God, do you not? You spiral in on your grasp and understanding of the love of God.

Is that so hard to understand? You see, the fact of the matter is, there is nothing in Scripture that is not, at one level, culturally relative. Nothing. Because all of Scripture is given in language, and language is a cultural phenomenon, whether it's Hebrew or English.

God does not communicate with us by dumping his divine mind into our mind without benefit of language. There is a sense in which everything that comes to us is through culture. The question is whether you can communicate some true things, some eternal things, some divine things through culturally relative things.

And the answer is, yes, of course you can. Let me give you one more illustration and then we'll pass this point out. There is a missiologist at Fuller Seminary by the name of Charles Craft who does not buy the traditional evangelical, confessional, historical understanding of biblical inerrancy and biblical revelation.

He argues, rather, that the Bible is more like a casebook. It has many different kinds of cases which are useful pastorally and in other kinds of ways for helping us understand things. So, this is his example.

If you're serving in Liberia in West Africa, and you're in a culture that has a lot of polygamy, you don't start off with the New Testament view of monogamy. You start off with David or Solomon or Abraham, all of whom had more than one wife, because there are different models of righteousness. There are different case studies.

And then if you say to him, but wait a minute, Charles, wouldn't you say that there are some things that are non-negotiable for all Christians? He calls himself Chuck, actually. Wouldn't you say that there are some things that are non-negotiable for all Christians? You can't make the Bible just a series of loosely connected case studies. It's got to fit together some way, doesn't it? And he says, well, yes, there are some things that you have to believe in, you have to accept unconditionally to be a Christian at all, but there are only very few of them.

And there are such simple things as Jesus is Lord, or Christ died for our sins and rose a third day according to the scriptures, and things like that. They're the only non-negotiables that are trans-cultural. Now, when I first read that in his book, I confess I was shocked on two fronts, because at one level he hasn't gone far enough, and at another level he's gone far too far.

You see, he wants the expression, Jesus is Lord, to be culturally independent, to be culturally trans-cultural. You see? But it's not. For a start, it's in English.

Moreover, if you learn Thai and go to Thailand, you learn Thai from University of Toronto here, and then you go to Thailand, and you stand outside a Buddhist temple, and as people come out of the temple, you stand up and you say in fluent Thai, Jesus is Lord! Jesus is Lord! Jesus is Lord! What will they hear you to be saying? Well, among other things, they will hear you to be saying that Jesus is inferior to Gautama the Buddha. You say, what? I didn't say anything like that. But you see, in Buddhist thought, you reach the highest stages of exaltation when nothing can any longer be predicated of you.

Gautama reaches the highest stage when he is neither hot nor cold, when he is neither good nor bad, when he is neither lord nor unlord. He's reached the highest stage of exaltation when nothing can any longer be predicated of him. So if you go and stand in front of a Buddhist temple and say, Jesus is Lord, then you are still predicating something of Jesus.

And if you are predicating something of Jesus, then inevitably he must be inferior to Gautama the Buddha, about whom you can predicate nothing. Which isn't quite exactly what you had in mind, is it? Now, do not

misunderstand what I mean by this illustration. I am not saying that you cannot affirm the truth that you mean and that Paul means by Jesus is Lord to a Buddhist in Thailand.

I'm saying you can't do it merely by repeating the words. What is at stake now is a whole worldview, a whole different way of looking at reality. Eventually you've got to question their whole way of looking at reality such that they think that the highest state of exaltation is reached when nothing can any longer be predicated.

It's not that they're dumb or that they're stupid or that the Thai language cannot accept the category Jesus is Lord. It is saying rather that all of our understandings are inevitably pegged to where we are in culture, in understanding, in our own biases. And part of genuine conversion regularly means transforming those understandings, and those biases, and those worldviews.

Do you see? Thus the expression Jesus is Lord is certainly a cultural one. It's expressed in a language. But that doesn't mean that you can't find out what Paul meant by it and absorb it into a Christian understanding here in Toronto or in Bangkok by so absorbing the whole Pauline and biblical view of who God is and what God is and what he has done and what truth is and what right and wrong is and what our offense is and what it means to confess Jesus is Lord in Paul's understanding of things that you cannot come to understand it in Paul's way.

Do you see? Thus you have eternal truth, transcendental truth, being expressed in cultural forms. But we can understand cultural forms. We can even move from one culture to another.

That's why we train transcultural ministries. That's why we learn other languages, isn't it? Yes, you can understand them. And God, in his infinite mercy, has not tried to dump on us some sort of atemporal truth, because we're not atemporal beings.

He has spoken to us in cultural forms, in Hebrew, in Greek, in Aramaic, which have now been translated into English and French and German. And now we can take those things and put them into Thai and Chinese and Swahili and Kikuyu and Kamba. Do you see? That is part of what it means to take eternal truth and move it through cultural forms so that people can understand it.

But it can't be understood. In other words, there are models that glean the best of our admitted limitations as finite, broken people, but that still leave a place for eternal, objective knowing of truth. Number five.

From a Christian perspective, an omniscient, talking God changes everything. It changes everything. You see, the terrible problem of a great deal of contemporary postmodernism is that it assumes a naturalistic stance.

It assumes a naturalistic stance. It assumes there is no God out there. But just allow into your postmodern reflections for five minutes the notion that there is a God out there who knows everything and who talks.

And it changes everything. You see, even such a God cannot talk in such a way that finite beings can understand his thoughts exhaustively, or else we would be God. But his knowledge is so perfect, his understanding so matchless, his knowledge so peerless, so exhaustive, that he is quite capable of speaking in such a way that we can understand him truly, even when we cannot understand him exhaustively.

And then he himself becomes the anchor point for all knowing. The final test of all exhaustive knowing is God himself. You see, it's in that sense that the reformers were right.

It's in that sense that the Middle Ages was right. They had other problems with their system, but they were right in saying that at the end of the day, all knowledge is finally bound up with God. And if you lose God, if you lose God, if you lose an omniscient being, sooner or later you are lost in a sea of relativity.

You are. I would love to pursue that one at length, but I'll pass it by. Number seven.

Six. Postmodernism is characterized by astonishing arrogance. Just astonishing arrogance.

You see, modernism was arrogant. It thought that by mere human reason, we could find out all knowledge, all truth. Just give us time and a few more years and a few more endowment dollars and we can find out the truth about almost anything.

Postmodernism claims that it is humbling the arrogance of modernism. But postmodernism is itself very arrogant. It is now saying, in effect, that even if God talks, because we are finite, we could not know that he talks.

We have thus effectively gagged God. No matter what God says, no matter what God does, we gag God by saying, yeah, but we're finite so we can't understand him in any case. That's the most arrogant thing of all.

That is elevating ourselves so that we can stand in judgment over all revelation. It is astonishingly, formidably so loaded with hubris and arrogance that it is massively God-defying. That needs to be said.

I remember talking to a young student at Cambridge University this past year when I was speaking at a mission over there. He came to me after one of the meetings and he said, Don, I think I'm seeing at least something of what you're saying. You're saying that Christians have another whole world view.

Christians have another whole frame of reference and that I need to look at things in a very different way. But he said, tell me, why should you think that your world view is better than my world view? You see, there's the question again. So I said to him, well, for two reasons basically, because my world view is true and second, because yours is false.

Which of course had to be said with a smile because that doesn't convince anybody in this framework. I said to him, well, for a start, tell me in your world view how you make a distinction between good and evil. Now, many sophisticated postmodernists have all kinds of things that they go into at that point, but he was honest.

He said, to be frank, I find that very difficult. He says, from a postmodernist frame where everything is relative, I find it very difficult to find any moral reason for condemning Hitler. And I said, you're at least an honest young man, but doesn't that tell you already what's the matter with your world view? Why do you have to ask me? If your world view leaves you with such a moral quagmire that at the end of the day you cannot make the differentiations that all human history attests to.

Differentiations between good and bad, between right and wrong, between cruelty and goodness. There's something wrong with your system. Get rid of it.

And yet the hubris associated with postmodernism now in the Western world is so, so powerful that anybody that questions it is often criticized for being the bigot. You see, it is a massively arrogant system, and sooner or later that arrogance has to be exposed. Number seven.

Christians who think about these things theologically will also weigh in the work of the Holy Spirit, the fact that we have been made in the image of God. The fact of the matter is that although we are called to give an answer to everyone for the faith that lies within us, although the Spirit regularly uses means, nevertheless, when people do get converted over the years and you look back at the things that have triggered it, they're strange, aren't they? They're strange. Sometimes it's a bit of kindness offered in the name of the Lord that proves convicting.

Sometimes it's the sheer goodness of a person who suffers a great deal and becomes a kind of model by virtue of his or her suffering. One of my best friends in the world is an Australian scholar called Peter O'Brien, a great and godly man, missionary for many years in India, and has written some wonderful commentaries and has been very effective all around the world. He was converted, humanly speaking, because his mother was converted.

And his mother was converted, humanly speaking, because she knew a Christian woman up the street who had one of these horrible, nervous diseases where the body just degenerates and degenerates and degenerates. And by the way that Christian woman suffered, Peter's mother was converted. And so Peter was converted.

And so certain Indians were converted. And certain books were written, all because of the way this woman suffered up the street, who didn't know any of the Indians or the books. So God has all kinds of strange ways to work these things out.

In my years of ministry, I only remember one case where a person was converted almost exclusively on intellectual grounds. When I was serving a church on the west coast of Canada, and there was a young woman in our church, a student at the University of British Columbia, she started dating a non-Christian, a football hunk, who was quite a bright lad too. And I had a bit of nervous tension about this.

I didn't like the way this one was going. But she used to bring him to see me every Saturday night at the church, and he'd bring a whole sheet of questions. We'd go to the pancake house, spend two or three hours, tell jokes, talk with one another, and he'd have his whole list of questions.

One, two, three, four. Okay, thank you. Goodbye.

He'd disappear. He'd start showing up for church every once in a while. Next week he'd come back, another whole set of questions.

The next week, week after week after week after week after week. Months went by. I answered his questions.

I answered his questions. I answered his questions. And then at the end of one evening he said, Okay, I'm ready now.

I'll become a Christian. Just like that. But that's rare.

That's very rare. That doesn't normally happen like that. When people get converted, normally there is a whole interplay of all kinds of social relationships and love and acceptance.

Sometimes people are reading their Bible out of the blue. They have no access to any Christians anywhere. The Lord is not shortened.

His arm is not shortened that he cannot save. He can save through all kinds of strange and odd means. Nevertheless, this must never ever become an excuse for us not to try to understand the people that we're dealing with, for several reasons.

Even giving answers that address where people are is part of the means that God uses. Moreover, as we shall see tomorrow morning, we shall discover that there is apostolic warrant for being sensitive in these areas. The way Paul evangelizes biblical literates in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch is not the way he evangelizes biblical illiterates in Athens.

Why not? It's because he recognizes that the two groups need different information. The genuine Christianity, to embrace it, includes embracing certain information. It's not just information, but it includes information.

It includes an entire worldview. So that nowadays, as we evangelize people who are farther and farther removed from a biblical worldview, one of the things that goes into effective evangelism today is providing more of a background, more information, more of what the Bible is about. Do you see? Now that's where I want to go tomorrow.

What I've given you today has been entirely preliminary, a way of showing that it is possible to get back into the debate. Tomorrow, I want to suggest the importance of worldview evangelism. That is to say, when you are dealing with people who no longer share your framework, so that what you mean by preaching the gospel is insisting Christ died for our sins, that he rose again, that you must trust him, that you must abandon yourself to him by faith and trust his grace.

When you're dealing with people who are polygamists or polytheists or New Agers, whose vocabulary is different, who know nothing about the biblical history of redemption, what information do you have to give them? What goes into establishing this larger worldview in which alone the gospel of Jesus Christ makes sense? Part of what is at stake, in other words, in this contemporary urgency to evangelize in the Western world, is precisely what is at stake when we go and evangelize in India or in a tribal group in Africa. You are involved in massive worldview transformation. Now, how do you do it? What can we learn from scripture in that respect? That is the question to which then I wish to return tomorrow with more emphasis on what the Bible actually says in this respect.

Now, before I close in prayer, are there questions you would like to raise? Did you hear the question? This gentleman knows some people who've been converted just by reading the Bible. Would it be sufficient with biblical illiterates and postmodernists just to give them the Bible, or would it need more preparation, more massaging, is his term, more explanation? Could we not just give them a copy of the gospel of John and let them read? A preliminary comment first before I try to answer the question. We all know people who've been converted just by reading the Bible, but people read the Bible out of a certain framework.

That's a right analysis, a right insight from postmodernists. If someone reads the Bible and has got a churchy background, but is reading it and reading it and reading it and reading it, then the truth of what it is

saying may well bear home. If the Spirit of God convicts them, converts them, opens their eyes, they will see things and they may well get converted.

One of the incoming students at seminary, I have a 32, 34-year-old who joined the American Army out of high school, barely squeaked out of high school. He was a flunky from the word go, a tough hombre, and joined the U.S. Army and eventually joined the Rangers. Then he eventually joined the paratroopers, 82nd Airborne.

When he joined 82nd Airborne, he was scared so witless, jumping out of airplanes all the time, that he started carrying the little Gideon Bible with him in his breast pocket as a sort of talisman, a good luck charm. He had never been to a church in his life. When he asked his dad about God, his dad simply said, we don't talk about stuff like that in our family, thank you.

But he started carrying this Bible because he was jumping out of airplanes. Eventually one day he sat down and read it, and read it for four hours. He could scarcely read, he was semi-literate, not biblically illiterate, just illiterate.

Then he began to read it, and he read it, and he read it, and he read it. In fact, he read it right through, and he got converted. So he went.

He didn't know where to go, so he went to the local chaplain who happened to be a Catholic. He said, Father, I've been saved. The father said to him, not yet you haven't, and started to teach him another way.

In due course, this fellow then moved on. After three tries at churches, he found a Bible teaching church where he was duly grounded, took some remedial courses, went to Columbia, and now he's at seminary as an A student, a late bloomer. There was no other mediating person, it was just the Bible.

So of course that didn't happen. On the other hand, it nevertheless has to be said that people bring their baggage and may misconstrue things unwittingly. I know of a Buddhist, it's a famous story, of a Buddhist who was given a New Testament to read, and started by reading the first four Gospels.

Then a Christian asked him what he thought of this man Jesus. The man said, this man Jesus is fantastic, he's unbelievably good. And the Christian was really chuffed, isn't this wonderful, a man seeing the Gospels so quickly.

He said, here is a man who was born, and he died, then he was born, and then he died, then he was born, and then he died, then he was born, and then he died, and by the time that fourth time came around, he was God. Four cycles, it took Gautama the Buddha a thousand. Now do you see what he's done with this? He's read the Gospels as if they are a series of reincarnations.

He's misunderstood what he's read, inevitably. A friend of mine was passing out New Testaments in a British university a few years ago, and he was giving them out on the condition that people read them. This particular fellow he didn't see for some weeks, and he saw him again, and he said, did you read that book I gave you? Yeah, I did read it.

He said, what did you make of it? Oh, he said it was alright. He said it was a bit boring at the front end. They sort of tell the same story four times.

But boy, did I like that science fiction at the end. Now, why does he say that? The point is he doesn't know anything about the genre of apocalyptic. It was only written between about 200 BC and 100 AD.

It's no longer written today. He had no category for it, so he thought of it in the closest literary category that he could understand, namely, science fiction. Did he understand it? The fact is that if you ask a question, can God use the Bible alone, the answer is yes.

But the fact of the matter is that God in his wisdom has given not only the scriptures, but teachers, and evangelists, and witnesses. God may use anything he pleases. But at the end of the day, we are never to use what God may use as an excuse for not deploying all that God mandates.

God has mandated that there be teachers in the church, and evangelists, and that we should be witnesses. Part of that witness, therefore, means that we learn fidelity on all these kinds of fronts, rather than resorting to only one of them. How does one address different cultures and worldviews at the same time? There's a lot more I'd love to say about that, but I'd better not say too much.

Let me just say two things. Number one, a pastor serving a multiracial congregation must learn to offer highly diverse applications. Eventually, he's got to read his way into and understand the different subcultures in his congregation.

If he doesn't, then by biasing things in one direction all the time, that will be the part that will become stronger, and the other parts will gradually weed off. I can think of some wonderful examples in that respect, but it takes a certain amount of hard work. That means that you have to, besides doing your Bible reading, and your theology reading, and your own devotional reading, and that sort of thing, you have to find out who's in your congregation.

Talk to them. What are their mythologies? What are their givens? What are their rights and wrongs? What are their stories? So that they become part of a grist for the mill in terms of contrasts or illustrative material or applications. What are their fears, their hopes? And if they are worded properly in the congregation, they will achieve two things.

They will not only achieve a kind of immediate application for that subgroup of the congregation, they will also inform other groups of the congregation what things look like from some other group. And because if it's a coherent explanation, it will apply to others in any case, it will have a derivative spin-off benefit elsewhere in any case. But there's a second element.

It's far more important. A great deal of expository preaching has focused so much on explaining the immediate text that we are in danger of losing the Bible's whole storyline, the big picture. One of the most important things that we need to regain in evangelical preaching today, especially in a multicultural context or in a context where there's a lot of biblical literacy, is how simultaneously in one sermon to explain the text that is being handled and to tie it to the big picture.

Because people don't know the big picture anymore. It's one thing to preach on half a verse for 40 minutes when you have a congregation of biblically literate people. And so you can tease out the implications and applications and make reference to Jedediah and make reference to Ehud the left-handed judge and Jonah and what Zechariah said and all of this.

But on the other hand, when you've got suddenly a congregation that has never heard of Moses, you say, at this point, Jesus insists that Jesus himself is above the law. Well, that's interesting. They've never heard

of Moses and the law.

What does that sound like? What, above the law of Canada? You see, it's incoherent. Sooner or later, you have to re-establish the big storyline, the big picture. Where I am going tomorrow in this matter of the storyline, the whole big picture, this worldview preaching, is a very simple point.

You cannot get agreement on what the solution is until you get agreement on what the problem is. Until people learn what the problem is of human beings as defined biblically, which means finally sin, understood as defiance and rebellion against the God who made us, with all the entailments pertaining thereto, and what the sole solution to that is. Until you get all of that put together as a package, inviting them to trust in Jesus to have abundant life is, quite frankly, a waste of time.

It's not only a waste of time, it's a distortion of the truth, because they will be hearing you to be saying something you don't mean to be saying. So a great deal of evangelical preaching, and of evangelism, and so forth, for people who are biblically illiterate, is learning how to put the big pieces back together again. I know that some of you, because you come from other churches, won't be here tomorrow, so let me just say this.

What I'm saying now is nothing new or novel or anything. It's merely recovering things that have been lost. There have been some mission groups that have been very effective at this.

One of the best of them has been New Tribes Mission. New Tribes Mission has developed a whole pattern in this regard, because they do work with new tribes who don't know anything at all about the Bible. They've developed a whole pattern in this regard nowadays, and they've developed literature, some of which is now available in English and so on, some based on the King James, and some on others.

Some of it I don't like, some of it's a bit too pokey or the like for a postmodern world. But the vision is basically right. They start with Genesis 1. They start telling the Bible's whole storyline.

So they have creation, and fall, and covenant with Abraham, and so on. And they don't introduce Jesus until fairly far along the line, because they realize that there's a whole worldview transformation at stake to make sense of Jesus. So that by the time they do introduce Jesus, it is powerful.

And in many parts of the world, they've seen entire villages and then whole tribes and so on genuinely, powerfully converted by laying out the groundwork. Now, there are ways of doing that sort of thing in the Western world as well, and I will try to deal with them tomorrow and mention some of the literature and conferences that help you do it and so on. But if I were returning to pastoral ministry today, and sometimes I'm sorely tempted, in an inner city church, I would move all of the evangelism into this worldview evangelism as quickly and as efficiently as I could.

Whether it's home groups, home Bible studies, you can do it in small groups, you can do it in large meetings, you can do it one-on-one. There are tools and so on available to get people to see what the big problem is. And Jesus is in that matrix and that matrix alone.

Or else at the end of the day, you are unwittingly presenting a skewed Jesus. Does that make sense? That's tomorrow. How does one become conversant with a society that doesn't know Scripture? After all, they are more familiar with popular media like movies and music.

Is there any value to preaching or witnessing from secular sources in order to have a common starting point? It does have some important things to say about what worship looks like, what authenticity looks like, what our illustrations look like. It has some things to say along those lines. I'll say a bit about that tomorrow, but not too much lest I get into trouble.

But I will say a bit about that tomorrow. There is at least something to be said along those lines, without being cutesy or merely innovative. Now there are some churches that are doing some things about that too.

A church I know in Phoenix, it went down to almost nothing. It was a Bible church. In a building that could seat about 900 or 1000, it went down to about 200 and was squabbling and fighting.

It was a miserable story full of sin and bitterness of one sort or another. And then in the mercy of the Lord, the Lord brought along a young man by the name of Savage, Tim Savage, who has advanced training as well. I don't remember what his undergraduate was in.

He went to Dallas and eventually went to Cambridge and then became an associate pastor under Roy Clements, who in my view is one of the ablest ministers in the English-speaking world today in terms of understanding these things in a desponding text. And then he went to this church. And now a few years later, I could tell you the story of the healing that was necessary and the repentance and so on.

Now they're running about 1,200 and they've got wonderful outreach in the community. One of the things he has started there in the church, now it couldn't be transported to every church. Partly it's a white-collar church, not a blue-collar church.

That affects things a little bit, how you do things. He started what they call the teleos group. Teleos is the Greek word for mature or perfect or something like that.

And eventually now they have a full-time staff member just to run what they call the teleos ministries. Now part of that is weekend conferences, but part of it is highly organized reading clubs. In the first year of being in a teleos group, then that group is assigned one book a month.

To be in this teleos group, you have to show up at least 11 of the 12 times or else you're out. Unless there's a reason, I mean if you're sick or something like that. You read the book before you come.

And then for one evening, the group comes together two or three hours long. They might have a meal together, but they have a teleos minister or somebody who's theologically informed to talk through that book. Now these mostly are serious books.

Some of them are devotional books, some of them are missionary biographies. In year two, they actually read in four months right through Calvin's Institutes. But they also read through Letters Along the Way and some C.S. Lewis.

And then they also will throw in some secular books that are analyzing the culture. Maybe, I don't know, Gross and Neufeld, Higher Spirituality or something like that. And then they get them to come together and talk about them from within a Christian framework.

And they mix them up in terms of disciplines and backgrounds, men and women, old and young, and talk about them under the direction of someone who really is biblically informed. They now have 40% of their

church in one or the other teleos word groups, teleos groups. No one is allowed to be an elder who has not passed through at least one or two layers of the teleos group and so forth.

And what they're trying to do is to up the understanding within the church, do you see, of that kind of reading. Now out of that then is coming people who are thinking through how to apply this kind of things to evangelizing business people in downtown Phoenix and so on. Now they're taking over a hotel, their ballroom and so on, once a month for noon hour talks with businessmen.

They do it eventually once a week and so on. But it's come out of people who are beginning to think through how to go about these sorts of things, you see, and tackling it. Now not every church is going to have a teleos group.

And some churches have more people who don't read much or some semi-literates in it. But every church needs to think through more and more how to rebuild the Bible's storyline within the congregation and how to share it. Now there are all kinds of ways of doing that and there are all kinds of bits of literature.

There's a little booklet that comes out of Australia, 160 pages long, that is a series of Bible studies that goes through the whole Old Testament in 11 sessions. Because all it's trying to do is to lay out the framework of the Bible's storyline. If you asked a lot of people who comes first, Ezekiel or Isaiah, they wouldn't know.

They don't know how the Bible fits together. So it's an attempt to rebuild those things which our fathers and mothers once knew and which we have largely lost sight of. So part of our job in preparing for evangelism is rebuilding the foundations again and then learning how to use those foundations in evangelistic outreach.

Shall we close in prayer? Our Father, we confess that sometimes we are discouraged by the work, by the challenges around us, and yet we serve the one who is Lord of all. O Lord God, increase our vision and our faith, our understanding. We do not simply need the rejuvenation of commitment, but the rejuvenation of understanding, to see ways ahead.

Help us to be willing to try things that fail and not be embarrassed, but simply to pick up and try again, as long as you have given us this commission to evangelize and evangelize and evangelize. Help this congregation, we pray, and others that are represented by folks here, to really see the challenges of Toronto, but far from being daunted by them, to say with Caleb, give me this mountain, and help them then to find not only the passion for intercessory prayer and the concern to learn from others who are forging ahead in this area, and the willingness to make sacrifices in time and energy, so that in due course should we meet again in two or three or four or five years, we will all be able to look back and say, ebenezer, hitherto the Lord has helped us. We ask these mercies for Jesus' sake.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/16/SID16889.mp3>

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