

(Postmodern Times) World View Evangelism

by D.A. Carson

Effective evangelism in postmodern times requires establishing an entire worldview and sharing the meta-narrative of the Bible.

Duration: 52:38

Scripture: Romans 1:18

Topics: "Postmodern"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of understanding and sharing a Christian worldview. He explains that it is possible to summarize the Bible storyline and the Gospel in a short amount of time, even as little as 15 minutes. The speaker also shares an example of a pastor who effectively taught Romans 1 to 8 to a biblically illiterate audience by providing them with copies of the text. He concludes by mentioning the need for practical approaches to teaching and answering questions, and ends with a quote from Billy Graham.

Transcript

35 years ago, a friend of mine from the West Coast went out to India as a missionary. Now, he was reasonably well-trained, and linguistically he was gifted, so he learned Hindi fluently. His task on the mission field was primarily to teach in an evangelical seminary that was then situated in the city of Yotmal.

It's now moved to Pune. He spent initially three terms, each of four, four and a half years. His first love, although his official job was to teach in the seminary, his first love was to do evangelism in the villages.

So as many weekends as he could, and throughout holiday time from the Divinity School, he went into the villages and he evangelized. Now, he understood that Hinduism is a syncretistic religion, that is, a religion that loves to put bits and pieces together and make a kind of stew, a kind of mishmash. You can always add one more god in Hinduism.

And so he knew that it is very important, in that kind of framework, to emphasize the exclusive sufficiency of Jesus, if people really are going to come to solid, committed, truthful faith in him. And so as a result, when he went, he tried to explain the Gospel story and kept insisting that Jesus alone is Lord. One must not speak of Lord Krishna.

One must not mix Jesus with others. One must come to terms with Jesus as the exclusive mediator between God and human beings. And over the years, he saw many, many, many hundreds of people make profession of faith.

What discouraged him is that he did not plant a single church. He saw all these people making profession of faith, but nevertheless, Jesus was somehow still, despite his best efforts, incorporated into a larger structure of Hinduism. Partly, it's a cultural thing, a way of looking at things.

In the Indian mindset, there is much more of gradation. Life isn't so antithetical, either this or that. Even their music reflects that.

Have you ever listened to Hindu music? We have notes and half notes, and we have a scale. And then you have your half notes. That's as far as we break it down.

Not Indian music. Between our half notes, they have 16 notes. And so Indian music sort of goes all over the map for Westerners, doesn't it? But truth is a bit like that, too.

So if you see somebody who's made a profession of faith--that, incidentally, is called a cantor system of music--if you see somebody in India make a profession of faith, and then you see them the next day going off to a temple, you say, but I thought you would become a Christian. Well, yes, maybe 70% Christian and still 30% Hindu, and there is no contradiction in their mind. And this troubled him.

He didn't know what to do about it. So he came home. He thought about it a great deal and then went back.

And this time, he spent all of his evangelistic efforts in just two villages, and he began with Genesis 1. From Genesis 1, he expounded the truth that there is but one God, different from the universe. This is not a pantheistic world. But one God, he is the creator, he is sovereign, he is the providential ruler.

And eventually he moved to Genesis 3 and the Fall. What's wrong with the human race is not some system of karma in which you simply get your own desserts, nor is it something intrinsically the matter with the physical world over against the spiritual world. Spirit is good, physical world is bad.

What is at heart wrong is rebellion against the one who made us. So it defined what sin was. And then gradually he worked through the next four years, through more and more and more of the Old Testament, and then eventually the New Testament, and in that framework preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

At the end of four years, he had seen relatively few people make profession of faith, but he had planted two churches. That sort of experience in various parts of the world is not uncommon, because when you move to different parts of the world where there is very little shared worldview, Christian ministry has to think of evangelizing worldviewishly. That is to say, you cannot simply assume a common, shared worldview and tack in a little bit of Gospel.

Rather, what is at stake is a whole transformation of worldview. Now what we did yesterday, for those of you who were not here, what we did yesterday was try to plot out some of the Western worlds today. We have got pretty well beyond this shared Judeo-Christian heritage with which many of us who are older grew up.

So not only in terms of immigrant groups who have come into Canada and no longer share this worldview, but in terms of Canadians who have been here for three, four, five, six generations, we have now moved into a period often labeled post-modern that is distinctively post-Christian in many respects, finds truth extraordinarily subjective. It is truth for me rather than objective truth. In addition, it changes the ground rules of talking about truth.

It changes the undergirding epistemology. We worked through such terms yesterday. In addition, it redefines the problems of humankind.

They are no longer in the area of sin or rebellion or guilt before God, but they are in the realm of self-actualization, self-realization, finding yourself in the universe, coming to fulfillment, discovering ultimate reality, and many other such categories. The result is that those of us who were brought up in a framework of evangelizing where we could assume that our hearers, our friends, our co-citizens were in the same general mental framework as we are, that day has long since gone. The result is that many of us are finding it exceedingly difficult to evangelize, and we're wondering a bit what's wrong.

We're finding the whole business discouraging. What I want to do in this hour is talk a little bit about worldview evangelism. This will be a topical presentation.

I'm still not going to work through texts of scripture until the morning service, when we'll look at an example where Paul demonstrates that he understands the issues exactly and serves ultimately as our supreme model in this respect. Then this afternoon we'll look at another passage from the writings of Paul. So I have four or five points that I want to make this morning, and I will try to leave enough time for a few questions and answers at the end.

Number one, then. Our struggle is a worldview struggle. That is, what is at issue in our evangelism today is establishing an entire worldview.

Now, let me repeat one thing I said yesterday for those who were not here. It used to be, when we did evangelism in this country, even twenty-five or thirty years ago, that ninety or ninety-five percent of our hearers shared our general outlook. If there is a God, then this God is personal and transcendent.

He has made the universe. The universe is unwinding in a certain direction. That is, history isn't going around and around and around in circles, as in many philosophies around the world.

But it's heading in a straight line toward an ultimate judgment day. There is a heaven to be gained, and a hell to be feared. There is a difference between right and wrong.

God himself is the final judge, and his judgment is perfect, and you must satisfy him. What's the matter with the world is finally rebellion against that God, and the only thing that can fix the world is to be reconciled to that God. And he sets the terms for that reconciliation.

Guilt is not only subjective--that is, we feel guilty--but it is objective. We are guilty, and that guilt must be looked after in some respect or another. At this point, Jesus is introduced, and most people in our society then thought they knew something about Jesus.

They knew that Christians referred to him as the God-man, and that he died on the cross, and that Christians believed he rose from the dead. Now, all of that was presupposed. That was part of the given.

You could assume that kind of thing going into any evangelistic encounter, whether small group or a large crusade or whatever. You could assume all of that as a given. For even agnostics and atheists who were present, even such people were not generic atheists or generic agnostics.

If you had an atheist in the Western world, the kind of God he or she disbelieved in was the Christian God or the Judeo-Christian God. It was not that such a person was disbelieving a Buddhist form of deity or a Hindu form of deity. Rather, this was the Christian God that was disbelieved in, and therefore the terms for discussion and debate were already present in the entire society.

So in that framework then, what preaching the Gospel meant was something like this. You preach somewhat about sin, so that people really do recognize they're guilty before God. Then you preach that Jesus is the sole mediator by virtue of his death on our behalf.

He dies that we might live. He pays our sin. He bears our guilt and reconciles men and women to the living God.

What we must do is abandon all pretense of earning God's favor by ourselves. We must cast ourselves upon him and trust him. He forgives us our sins and pours out his spirit upon us as a kind of down payment of the promised inheritance that will be ours in the new heaven and the new earth.

That's the heart of the Gospel. Now we would tweak it various ways depending on who we were confronting. So that if we were confronting, let's say, a population with many, many Roman Catholics in it, then inevitably we would lay a little extra emphasis on passages like Ephesians 2, 8 and 9. It's not by works that we're saved.

No, no, no. We're saved by grace through faith. This is not of ourselves.

It is the gift of God. It can't be of works lest anyone should boast. Nevertheless, we are God's workmanship created unto good works and so forth.

That's the kind of thing that we would emphasize. If on the other hand we were primarily evangelizing a group that came from a very liberal background, we would perhaps specifically emphasize the deity of Christ or the fact that Christ really did rise from the dead and there were witnesses. But basically that was the Gospel.

We didn't have to worry about the whole world, you question. But nowadays in the West, not only because there are many Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists and people from New Age background or no background and so forth, but also because the whole Christian heritage has been lost in this sea of amorphous post-modernism and a great deal of biblical illiteracy. If you say Christ died for our sins, how will people hear you? Sins is no longer a word that is part of the ordinary Canadian's vocabulary.

The hardest thing I do nowadays in university missions is not talk about the death and resurrection of Christ. That's pretty easy. It's talking about sin.

But the fact of the matter is that unless people already have a Judeo-Christian worldview where God is the one who is offended and sin is an objective and real and ugly guilt before God that must be paid for, to talk about Christ dying for our sins doesn't even make sense. It just doesn't even make sense. It becomes sentimental nostalgia, but nothing more.

And if instead you try to downplay the offence of sin and speak in ways that people won't be offended by, then you're even up a worse creek without a paddle. Because now if you start speaking of the abundant life or Jesus gives you real meaning to life or if he gives you a sense of security or he sorts out your marriage or whatever it is that he does, you see we could get away with saying such things in the past because people fit those sorts of sentences into this bigger Judeo-Christian worldview in the first place. They had already bought into the larger worldview and if you then said something like, and if you really do close with Christ he'll help sort out something or other in your life, well they fit it automatically into a bigger framework.

But when the framework's gone, then all they hear is that Jesus sort of gives you what you want. Which of us doesn't want an abundant life? Whatever that means, fill in the blank for what abundance means. Which of us doesn't want to be self-actualized or therapeutically blessed? What does it mean? So that if you talk with entirely secular people nowadays, the under 30 biblical illiterates or people from New Age backgrounds or the like, and you speak of the blessing that Jesus has given you in your life without establishing any of the framework, then they might very well say, oh I'm so happy for you.

And since I've been using crystals I've been feeling a lot better myself too, it really has helped me a great deal. And the perfect crystal with an excellent matrix, the radiation that comes from my aura somehow locks into it and I tap into this energy from the universe that has helped me enormously and given me a great deal of self-confidence. Now what do you say? Do you see? Nor am I laughing at them.

That's what a lot of people believe. So it becomes as obvious as can be that we are in the situation nowadays of my friend in India. That part of what it means to evangelize is to go farther back.

You have to tell a story line. Otherwise the presentation of Christ is, I cannot say this more strongly, simply incoherent. It is simply incoherent.

And therefore we have to think how to do this. To put it in the terms understood by postmodernists, if this does not interest you for two minutes then tune out for two minutes and then come back in. Contemporary postmodernists, these are terms that I tried to define yesterday and I don't want to go back and review all of that material again.

Contemporary postmodernists love narrative. They love stories. Partly because stories can be interpreted and tweaked in different directions.

What they dislike is the meta-narrative. That is the big story that explains all the other story. You see in the same way that metaphysics is the physics behind the physics.

It is the reality that explains all the physics. So also the meta-narrative is the big story that explains all the little stories. Postmodernists love stories.

I tell you my story, you tell me your story. We all share our stories and no story is either right or wrong. It is either right or wrong for me.

That is all. What they dislike, what they are suspicious of is the meta-narrative. The big story that explains all the other stories.

But that is what Christians teach. A meta-narrative. A big story that explains all the other stories.

And that big story, that meta-narrative, is precisely what is laid out across the Bible's storyline. The Bible's plotline. Because the Bible has a story.

It is not simply a collection of individual psalms, or individual prophecies, or individual moralisms. It has all of those things and much more as well. But the Bible itself embraces a story.

A true story. But there is a plotline to it that begins with creation, and fall, and judgment in the flood. Then God seeking out the beginnings of a new race, a covenant community in Abraham.

Then it is the story of the Jews, really, in interaction with this broader world and all of its various covenantal structures and failures. So that you have the failure after failure at the time of the Exodus. Failure after failure at the time of the Judges.

In those days each man did what was right in his own eyes. There was no king in Israel. Oh God, how we need a king.

Then they get a king for the wrong reasons. And he mucks them up too. And then they get another king after God's own heart.

But even this one after God's own heart ends up sleeping with the wrong person and murdering somebody. And then the whole fall of the Davidic dynasty. And then exile, more judgment.

The people come back, but how many of them come back? 42,000 out of millions. And then the words of the prophets anticipating what is still to come, what is still to come, what is still to come. Then comes Jesus.

And he embodies Israel. He embodies this Davidic kingship. And he dies on the cross as the sacrifice that has been being modeled all along in the temple system.

As the temple, the meeting point between God and human beings. As the high priest who does this reconciling work. You see so many of the things that have been taught in a modular way, we say a typological way, are now embodied in him.

And out of this comes the continuation and the transformation of the people of God under the terms of the new covenant. Until finally you come to the return of Christ in the new heaven and the new earth. Now that's the Bible storyline.

And most of us, if we've been Christians at all, know that storyline. We know how it fits together and what bearing it has on how we see right and wrong and so forth. But let's be quite frank, the overwhelming majority of people around us don't know anything about that.

And yet that is the Christian meta-narrative. And very few of the individual narratives in scripture make sense until that meta-narrative is put into place. So now what do we do about it? Number two.

The first point, you see, is to see that our struggle is a worldview struggle. It's to see what the problem is, to define the terms. Then in the second place, what do we do about it in terms of what we teach and how we go about this matter? Let me give you an example that a friend of mine uses and then try to lay out the principal point that I'm after.

This is a friend in Britain who's about my own age, one of the most able, expository preachers in the English-speaking world. Constantly working with people on the fringe. He's pastor of a church of about 800 or 900, which in Britain is enormous.

In the United States that's nothing, but in Britain that's an enormous church. And draws about 300, 350 university students every Sunday as well. And this man gives quite a bit of time each year to preaching university missions and the like.

Three or four years ago he preached at Durham University, and what he did was to expound in seven sessions Romans 1-8. Now, you need to understand that when you go to a university mission nowadays nobody brings a Bible. So he put out the text of what he was going to speak on, a photocopy on each chair in the hall every night.

Now, provided you make acknowledgments, you are permitted to do that. That is not infringing copyright, provided you make acknowledgments on each copy. I do it all the time, and I check with the publishers.

Then there were other sessions of course, noon hour talks and all kinds of things, but in fact what he was doing was teaching this basically biblically illiterate crowd Romans 1-8. Now stop for a moment and think what they were getting. What's in Romans 1-8? Well, the 17 verses or so are sort of a declaration of the love of God and that sort of thing.

And then from 1-18 to 3-20 you have perhaps the most sweeping condemnation of the entire human race in all of Scripture. What is the matter with the human race? And here you have this enormous emphasis on people turning away from their Creator, so now you're in the doctrine of creation, worshipping the created thing, the creature, rather than the Creator, substituting created things for God, which affects then human relationships and human sexuality. He has a section in the second sermon on homosexuality in a university framework, handles it very sensitively but boldly.

By the time you're into Romans 2, then he's showing that religion doesn't solve anything. It doesn't solve a thing. And in chapter 3, then, he works out how the race is so condemned in every area of its life and work and outlook.

What we need is a whole new race. And by the time he hits chapter 3, verses 21 and following, he is into this fantastic section of atonement. That's the section we shall look at this afternoon, in fact, where God sets forth Christ to be the propitiation for our sins, whatever that means, which he then duly expounds in some light.

Then, further on, chapter 4, you're into Abraham and justification by grace through faith. So now he's telling something of the storyline of the Old Testament, where Abraham fits into things, the primacy of faith. And you see, he keeps on going until by the time he gets to chapter 8, there you have the gift of the Spirit, in consequence of Christ's cross work, poured out upon us as the downpayment of the promised inheritance, in anticipation of the new heaven and the new earth, for the whole creation is groaning in travail, waiting for the adoption of sons.

You see what's happened? He's got a whole framework, and at the end of each meeting, instead of inviting people to come forward and this sort of thing, he says things like, now if this is brand new to you and very strange, you're not ready yet, but we're running a number of Bible studies and discussion groups so that you can understand these things better. And after all such university missions there are a variety of

such studies going on. But if, on the other hand, the Spirit of God is already talking to you and you know God is after you, then we have another room just down the hall, room such and such, where I will be after this meeting for fifteen or twenty minutes to explain these matters a little more personally, and we'd like to see you there.

Now during the course of that week, the average meeting had about 330 people, and about 32 made genuine profession of faith, some of whom are now in the ministry today, and then over the next few weeks more were converted to these individual Bible studies. Now in my own university missions what I try to do is something that, believe it or not, I first tried in a gentle way to do, rather imperfectly and blusterily I'm afraid, with Pastor Barry Duguid at Melrose Baptist twelve years ago, fifteen years ago, something like that. And that is to try to preach through the whole Bible.

Now you can't do that in a sermon or two. What I've done over the years is break up the Bible into fifteen sermons. Now I don't try to explain the whole Bible, but to pick up fifteen passages which are the turning points in Scripture.

Now at no point have I ever given all fifteen, because most university missions aren't that long, but I've used anywhere between one and eight or ten of them at a go. The first is the God who does not wipe out rebels. Now in that case I deal with parts of Genesis 1, 2, and 3, and because nobody brings their Bibles, you have to provide text in each case, which I leave on each seat in the hall.

The next one is the God who writes his own agreements, and that's really on the Abrahamic Covenant. Now if you take the first one, the God who does not wipe out rebels, what you are really doing in that exposition of parts of Genesis 1, 2, and 3 is expounding something about who God is, who human beings are made in his image, the nature of creation, the nature of human accountability to God because we have been made by him and for him, the nature of human beings in relationship with God and with each other before the Fall, what the Fall does to human beings in terms of our whole corruption of nature, and in terms of our relationships, and in terms of all the sins that come out of that. Now because some people only come to a meeting once, you have to say something about Jesus in every meeting, and I understand that in these meetings very seldom do you get people coming for the whole series, although you press for it.

So you have to make some jumps to the New Testament every time, and the jump in this case is New Adam Christology. You don't call it that, but that's what it is. That is what we need is a whole new humanity, a whole new human race, and that's what Jesus brings.

And then a little bit about the Gospel there with the promise of meetings in the Bible. When you come to Abraham, the God who writes his own agreements, you are introducing the notion of covenant, which is very important for understanding the Bible. How can you understand much about the Bible without knowing something about covenant? Old covenant, new covenant, covenant of grace, God's sovereignty in the covenants, obedience under the terms of the covenant.

You have to understand something about agreements and covenants, don't you? And then Abraham also provides a wonderful example of someone who is justified by grace through faith, and at the same time you are also setting out the beginning of the storyline, where this is heading in terms of a whole new race. And then the one after that that I usually use is the God who legislates. And then I expound chunks of the Ten Commandments, Exodus 20, and chunks of Leviticus, and the sacrificial system, and so forth.

Yeah, you can preach Leviticus evangelistically, because that too is part of a storyline for which you need to make sense to people who have no idea how the Bible is put together. And this proceeds and proceeds until eventually you get to the God who becomes a man, and eventually the God who declares the guilty just, which is justification. And the last two, finally, are the God who is very angry, and the God who triumphs.

Now, let me tell you in the strongest possible terms, this is not clever. The whole point is that it is not clever. It's elementary.

People don't have a clue. You have to start farther back. Our problem is that we have been so endowed, endowed, blessed with Christian heritage that we can talk the talk in such a way that we can easily communicate with one another who also share the same vocabulary and heritage.

But our primary task is how to make those things coherent and understandable to people who don't know any of this history or vocabulary or the like. That is what it means to proclaim the whole counsel of God. That is what it means.

Proclaiming the whole counsel of God does not mean spending eight years on Romans 3. It means explaining the whole story line, giving the whole big picture. That's the whole. Now, what that means is that in our individual Bible studies, in our sharing of the Gospel, in our small groups, in our evangelism with neighbours, we need to find tools and ways and emphases that give people this big picture.

Nowadays, increasingly, there are things like that out there to help us, risingly so. Thus, for example, the New Tribes mission, which is constantly dealing with tribes that know nothing, has begun to produce a whole lot of material that is designed to take people through the whole Bible at various rates and speeds. Now, some of it is not appropriate for North America, I understand that, but nevertheless, if you get hold of some of the New Tribes mission material, much of which is available in English, it can give you some ideas for how to adapt that sort of thing into neighbourhood Bible studies and the like for this community.

There are some friends in Australia who are doing a lot of this, a chap called Phil Jensen, and anything produced by the St. Matthias Press out of Sydney, Australia, where they have, for example, a way of going through the whole Old Testament in eleven sessions. What is at stake in all of this, you see, is simply the fact that people need to have some of this material built in. One of the implications of this, incidentally, is that many people take a little longer before they come to genuine profession of faith.

For example, it was just a one-day mission that I had at Oxford last year, Oxford University. There were a lot of Christians there, but maybe 250 non-Christians as well, and at the end, 16 people signed up for these ongoing Bible studies, these evangelistic Bible studies. So far as I know, no one made profession of faith at the meeting.

That's not uncommon. These are complete pagans. But they signed up for these ongoing Bible studies at which the Gospel is presented in the framework of the whole biblical revelation.

And then the curate of the church that was responsible for this wrote me some weeks later and said, eleven of the sixteen have now clearly made profession of faith and are showing signs of grace. We're praying for the other five. That is typical in university missions nowadays.

That is to say, the level of ignorance is so profound that it takes a little longer to build these matters up. We shall see in this morning's message that Paul understands exactly that point in Athens. We'll come to it

in due course.

So the second point, then, is that part of our responsibility is to fill in the Bible's big story, the Bible's meta-narrative, and there are various ways of doing it. This is not something, therefore, that is to be left only for pastors and theologians and roving evangelists. My point is that these sorts of things are the sorts of things that can be done by almost any thinking, growing Christian.

This is not something that is more difficult or deeper. It's learning how to simplify and clarify to put in the big turning points. Do you see? Now, let me insist, lest we seem to be curtailing the work of the Holy Spirit or somehow minimizing what he does in bringing men and women to conviction of sin, let me insist in the strongest terms that I am not suggesting, not for a moment, that evangelizing people is merely a question of educating them.

Not at all. This is still part of proclamation. It is still part of preaching Jesus and Jesus crucified.

For it is preaching Jesus and Jesus crucified within the framework in which the Bible gives him. It is saying, however, that God normally uses means. At times of massive revival, the Spirit may come upon people and convert many, many thousands very, very quickly.

But normally God is a God of means. Within this framework, then, I am not even suggesting that there is a formula for how quickly or how smartly you give this worldview. There is a sense in which you can give a Christian worldview in fifteen minutes.

You can share the Gospel with a whole Christian worldview in fifteen minutes. If somebody is dying and on her deathbed she calls for someone from the local church, she has never been to a church before, she knows nothing about the Bible, but she is frightened and she says, tell me the Gospel, I am dying, I have maybe fifteen minutes to live. What do you say? Well, it is going to take me eleven weeks in the Bible study.

Obviously, you are not going to do that. You see, you can summarize the Bible's storyline in fifteen minutes, in ten minutes, in five minutes. Of course you can.

Nevertheless, you must still face the same fact that my friend faced in India. The overwhelming majority of the people that you deal with are not on their deathbeds, and you are dealing with a confrontation of worldviews, and it takes time to build a biblical worldview in which alone the Gospel of Jesus makes sense. In the third place, questions about how to get into the discussion need to be replaced by prior questions about where you are going in the discussion.

Let me repeat that and then explain it. Questions about how you get into such a discussion need to be replaced by prior questions about where you are going in the discussion. You see, when I start talking about this, inevitably somebody starts coming along and says, how do you get a conversation like that going? What's the way in? And that is a useful question.

But I want to insist in the strongest terms that it's a second-order question. The first-order question is, where are you going? Now let me give an illustration and explain the point a little more clearly. Charles Coulson, Chuck Coulson, tells the story of a time when a reporter in New York offered him a kind of challenge.

I know that you were political, and that you were involved in Watergate, and that you went to prison, and that you were a bit of a sleazeball, and now you've made this sort of profession of faith, and you've started prison ministries and all the rest. I'll tell you what, I will take you out to the most expensive meal in the town, provided you spend the evening at that meal trying to convert me. That's the deal.

Now isn't that a challenge? And probably this reporter, for all I know, really wanted it as an excuse to write up and make an interesting story, you know, how Chuck Coulson tried to convert me. Ah, you can make a great story out of that, probably sell it for several thousand bucks. But Coulson is not one to back down from a challenge like that.

So he took this fellow out, and they had this wonderful meal, and he tried all of his best evidentialist apologetics, you know, all the evidences why Jesus really did come back from the dead. And it's still worth reading material like that. By all means, read Frank Morrison's book, *Who Moved the Stone*, and things like that.

And then he tried all of his best presuppositional apologetics, and the kind of stance that this fellow was taking, and his cynicism, and his naturalism, and what gives him the right to adopt these sorts of stances. And he gave his own testimony and so on, and this fellow had the answers. He wasn't impressed by any of this sort of thing.

Just cynical. And toward the end of the evening, Chuck Coulson said, have you seen the new Woody Allen film? It was new then. Have you seen the new Woody Allen film, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*? And the fellow had.

Now, because I'm sure most people in this church are sufficiently pious, they don't know about the Woody Allen film. Let me tell you what it's about. In this Woody Allen film, the protagonist is a doctor who kills his mistress.

He kills his mistress and then is terribly afraid of being caught, and he has terrible paroxysms of guilt, subjective guilt, because he's not only done this terrible thing, but every time he turns around he feels that the police are on his tail and they're going to find out. Nowadays, forensic laboratories are so powerful and so forth. But with the passage of time, as he goes along in the film, he discovers that the police aren't going to find out.

He's pulled off the perfect crime. They don't have a clue. He's got free.

And now he's got a choice to make. Does he let the guilt of this thing crush him for the rest of his life? Destroy him? Or does he say, well, after all, my own naturalistic tenets teach me that this woman whom I killed was nothing more than a conveniently arranged conglomeration of atoms which are now nicely disintegrating. So there's no moral significance in what I've done.

And he opts for the latter. And that's the way the film ends. *Crimes and misdemeanors*.

That's all it was. Just a misdemeanor. Now, of course, Woody Allen and the informed reader or viewer of the film is supposed to remember that this is actually played off against a very famous book by Dostoevsky in the last century.

In the last century, a Russian author, Dostoevsky, wrote a book called *Crime and Punishment*. In *Crime and Punishment*, the protagonist there decides to commit the crime. He's going to pull it off.

And he knows that the way the police get you is by looking through all the relationships that the victim had, because most murders are committed by people who know the victim, unless they're random acts of violence. So they look through the victim's past life and then try to find all the people that could have had some reason for committing the murder. So he therefore, because he's going to commit the perfect crime, chooses a victim with whom he has no connection whatsoever.

He chooses an old lady who's living all by herself, whom he doesn't even know. He just picks her out of the crowd, follows her home, finds out about her, and eventually he kills her. And he commits the perfect crime.

And he too goes through paroxysms of guilt. And he's looking over his shoulder and the police are on his tail, he thinks, and he almost gives himself away several times because he's feeling so terrible about all of this. Except eventually he discovers too that the police don't have a clue.

He really has to pull it off. He's committed the perfect crime. Only in his case, his Christian conscience, now Christian not in an evangelical sense exactly, but in the sense of the whole Judeo-Christian heritage of the West, where you really do believe there's a difference between good and evil and right and wrong, his Christian conscience is so troubling him that eventually, to keep himself from going insane, he gives himself up.

Crime and punishment. When we retell the story in the 20th century, crimes and misdemeanors. Now Colson says, are these the only choices? When we do something wicked to lash ourselves with guilt until we are driven to the abyss of despair, or walk away from it and say it doesn't matter, are those the only choices? Please turn to side B now.

For the first time in the whole evening, the man began to listen. Now from there, Colson went on to another book. This is Tolstoy, War and Peace.

You may have read it. Do you remember Pierre in War and Peace? Why is it that the good I want to do, I do not do, and the evil I do not want to do, I do? Sounds vaguely familiar, doesn't it? Because you see, so much of this literature comes out of a heritage of the Judeo-Christian framework, you see? So people are often speaking in ways that reflect that framework. Now from there, Colson moves back into Paul and Pauline anthropology, that is, a biblical doctrine of human beings, which can only be made sense of when you put in the framework of a biblical doctrine of God, and of creation, and of who we are, and why we view right and wrong like this, and then comes to the cross.

Now the reason why I tell you this story is not to admire Colson, or to get you all to read Tolstoy, or any such thing. It's simply to point out that there may be many, many, many ways into the conversation, but the critical question is not how you get in, it's where you're going. You see, the whole point of that story is not how clever Colson was to have read some Tolstoy, or to have read Dostoevsky, or what his morals are in going to a Woody Allen film.

It's got nothing to do with any of that. It's where you're going. And he understands that to make sense of the gospel of Jesus Christ, he must not only engage this fellow's interest at some point, of course that's part of all evangelism, but he must take him, first of all, to see what the problem is, what the challenge is, what the need is.

Otherwise, you can't get an agreement on what the solution is. If you don't get an agreement on what the problem is, you can't get an agreement on what the solution is. So if you're trying to present the good news, the gospel, without people having a biblical view of what the bad news is, the curse, and sin, and condemnation, and hell, you will always, always, always, wittingly or unwittingly, transform the good news into something else.

Thus, if you present Jesus as the one who can sort out your feelings of profound loneliness and alienation, that may present a faithful gospel if the person hearing it drops his or her sense of loneliness and alienation into the bigger Judeo-Christian heritage in which they were brought up. But if they weren't brought up with it in the first place, then the gospel of Jesus Christ becomes a therapeutic blessing which takes away your loneliness and sense of alienation. Now, I don't mind, you see, if you start your sermon, or your address, or your Christian witness, or your chat across coffee to a friend, or your Bible study, by talking about the sense of loneliness and alienation.

That might be a way of getting somebody's attention. Nothing wrong with that. But sooner or later, that sense of loneliness and alienation must be tracked back to its source in human rebellion against the God who has made us in his own image, for his own glory, and for our good.

In other words, it must be tracked back into the Bible's storyline before you can present Jesus. Because if you present Jesus before you have done that, you presented Jesus who's basically a therapeutic Jesus who solves your loneliness problem. Instead of seeing the loneliness problem as part of a deeper alienation against God that the Bible calls sin.

Do you see? Thus, although it is entirely appropriate to ask the second order question, how do you get into the conversation? And if I had more time, I'd give you 20 or 30 or 40 ways. There are lots of ways of getting into a conversation. The first order question is not, how do you get into the conversation? The first order question is, where are you going once you get the conversation going? You simply must think of ways again and again and again, regardless of how you start, where you start, of tracking backward into the Bible's whole storyline.

Otherwise, the whole gospel of Jesus Christ is simply incoherent. Now lastly, I would love to say a lot more things, but I'm running out of time here. Let me offer some small practical reflections.

In terms of the local church, there are all kinds of things we can do, even if the steps we take are slow, step by step, one at a time. Obviously one of the steps is a certain kind of friendly openness to people, so that we get to know them as people, even people with very different cultures and heritages and languages and accents and hues of skin and age and background and senses of humour and the like. One of the most important things at that juncture is getting to know people, because you cannot talk with people at a deep level about these kinds of matters that I've spent almost all my time on, unless you get to know people.

It's elementary, but it needs to be said and re-said. Then secondly, some churches successfully run what they call guest services. Now this is a guest service, but things are tweaked a little bit so that they're a little more comprehensible to outsiders.

In a guest service, everyone in the church covenants together to try to bring in a pagan neighbour, or a Muslim neighbour, or a Hindu neighbour, or a New Age, post-modernist neighbour. You try to bring in a friend who's not a Christian. And in this sort of service, you don't change what you normally do, you merely

explain it a bit.

You don't say, now because we have so many non-Christians here tonight, now we're going to have entertainment, now we're going to have showtime, now we're going to have amusing jokes, or a special musical group. Rubbish. What you do is merely do what you always do, but explain it a little better as you go along.

Instead of saying, hymn number 333. So people scramble, they see that they're reaching for a hymn book, so they reach for a book in front of them, and they don't realise they pulled out the Bible instead of the hymn book, and they open it, it's upside down, they turn it around, and it says Isaiah at the top, and they don't know what that means. It's just embarrassing, do you see? No, no.

You say something simple like, Christians love to sing because we have so much to sing about. In this church, we sing songs that have been written across the centuries. Some are very old, and some are recent.

Later, we're going to be singing a couple of songs that have been written in the last 20 years, but our first one was written about 150 years ago, and it tells us of, you'll find it in the blue book in front of you on page 332. You see, it's the same sort of service, it's just that you've explained a bit more. In some of these services, where you have real secularists coming in, I introduce prayer.

Many of these people have never prayed. They've never prayed in their whole lives. They don't know what prayer is.

Or, the only time they've seen prayer is when they've been flipping channels and they've seen some overheated thing on some sort of gospel channel from the United States. So you say something like, God is a talking God, and he loves to hear us talk back to him. When we talk back to him, it's prayer.

That's what we mean by prayer. We find it happy, we find it comfortable in our heritage to bow our heads as a mark of respect, to shut our eyes, to cut out distractions. If you have not been familiar with prayer, that's alright, just listen as the people of God pray.

Let us pray. And then everybody bows their head, and there's some people looking around thinking, this is really hot stuff. And then you pray.

And you don't pray for 30 seconds, Lord, we just want to bless you for being here. No, no, no, you don't tone it down. You pour out your heart to God with adoration, and sincerity, and passion, and intercession, because what many people are looking for today is a genuine authenticity.

You don't dilute anything. You just make the level of communication a little simpler. You explain a bit more what's going on.

Now there are many, many other things that can be done along these lines, practical things, but I promised Pastor Barry Duguid that I would try to shut up by quarter to, and so if I don't do it, I'm going to be in big trouble. I will take one question, and then I will close. Better yet, I will close.

To quote Billy Graham, may the Lord bless you all real good.

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