

**Dr. Timothy Keller
Senior Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church
New York City**

**Ockenga Institute Pastors' Forum
Wednesday, April 5, 2006**

**Wednesday Chapel
Preaching to the Heart Without Being Pietistic: Page 2**

**Pastors' Forum Sessions
Unintentional Preaching Models: Page 4**

**Reading, Preparation, Conversation, and Preaching:
Page 11**

Preaching to 'Emerging' Culture: Page 23

PREACHING TO THE HEART

.....Without being pietistic (or behavioristic)

1. Not working on the will or the emotions but on the heart.
 - a. Galatians 2
 - b. A modern example
 - c. Other Biblical examples
2. 'Elder brother' moralistic change
3. The nature of gospel virtue
4. Preaching to the idols of the heart
5. Solving listeners' problems with Jesus, not just redoubled effort.
6. Preaching into Joy.

IDENTIFYING IDOLS

Using 'Problem Emotions' (inordinate desires) to identify idols

a. If you are angry. Ask, "is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am angry--because I am being blocked from having something I think is a necessity when it is not?" Write down what that might be:

b. If you are fearful or badly worried. Ask, "is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so scared--because something is being threatened which I think is a necessity when it is not?" Write down what that might be:

c. If you are despondent or hating yourself: Ask, "is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so 'down'--because I have lost or failed at something which I think is a necessity when it is not?" Write down what that might be:

Using "motivational drives" to identify idols.

"...that most basic question which God poses to each human heart: "has something or someone besides Jesus the Christ taken title to your heart's functional trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight? Questions...bring some of people's idol systems to the surface. 'To who or what do you look for life-sustaining stability, security and acceptance?...What do you really want and expect [out of life]? What would [really] make you happy? What would make you an acceptable person? Where do you look for power and success?' These questions or similar ones tease out whether we serve God or idols, whether we look for salvation from Christ or from false saviors. [This bears] on the immediate motivation of my behavior, thoughts, feelings. In the Bible's conceptualization, the motivation question is the lordship question: who or what "rules my behavior, the Lord or an idol?" -- David Powlison, "Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair"

<u>What We Seek</u>	<u>Price Willing to Pay</u>	<u>Greatest nightmare</u>	<u>Others oft feel</u>	<u>Prob emotion</u>
COMFORT (Privacy, lack of stress, freedom)	Reduced productivity	Stress, demands	Hurt	Boredom

APPROVAL (Affirmation, love, relationship)	Less independence	Rejection	Smothered	Cowardice
---	-------------------	-----------	-----------	-----------

<u>What We Seek</u>	<u>Price Willing to Pay</u>	<u>Greatest nightmare</u>	<u>Others oft feel</u>	<u>Prob emotion</u>
CONTROL (Self-discipline, certainty, standards)	Loneliness; spontaneity	Uncertainty	Condemned	Worry

POWER (Success, winning, influence)	Burdened; responsib	Humiliation	Used	Anger
--	---------------------	-------------	------	-------

REPLACING IDOLS

If you struggle with anxiety. Ask: (1) How are these anxieties being caused by an inordinate hope for some-one or some-thing to give me the control over my life and environment only Jesus can really give me? (2) How does Christ give me so much more fully and graciously and suitably the very things I am looking for elsewhere? Rejoice and think of what he has done and what he has given you. Let him quiet you with his loving power. Sample rejoicing prayer for times of **anxiety**: *"Lord, I live by your sheer grace. That means though I don't deserve to have things go right, yet I know you are working them all out for good (Rom.8:28) because you love me in Christ. All my punishment fell into Jesus' heart--so you only allow bad things for my growth, and for loving wise purposes. I can relax, because my security in life is based neither on luck, nor hard work, but on your gracious love for me. You have counted every hair on my head (Matt.10:30-31) and every tear down my cheeks (Ps.56:8)--you love me far more and better than anyone else loves me or than I love myself. And remove my idols of security--which never can give me the security I need."* Pray this prayer when anxious or one you write out yourself.

If you struggle with anger and pride. Ask: (1) How are this anger and hardness being caused by an inordinate hope for some-one or some-thing to give me the power and significance that only Jesus can really give me? (2) How does Christ give me so much more fully and graciously and suitably the very things I am looking for elsewhere? Rejoice and think of what he has done and what he has given you. Let him humble and soften you with his grace and mercy. Sample rejoicing prayer for times of **anger**: *"Lord, when I forget the gospel I become impatient and judgmental of others. I forget that you have been infinitely patient with me over the years. You are slow to anger and rich in love (Psalm 145:8). When I am anything other than tender-hearted and compassionate to people around me, I am like the unmerciful servant, who, having been forgiven an infinite debt, is hard toward his fellow debtor (Matt.18:21-35). I live completely and solely by your grace and long-suffering, and I praise you for it. Tenderize my heart toward others as I do so. And remove the idol of power--the need to get my own way--which is making me so hard toward these people."* Pray this prayer when irritable and angry or one you write out yourself:

If you struggle with rejection and a sense of worthlessness. Ask: (1) How is this despondency being caused by an inordinate hope for some-one or some-thing to give me the sense of approval that only Jesus can really give me? (2) How does Christ give me so much more fully and graciously and suitably the very things I am looking for elsewhere? Rejoice and think of what he has done and what he has given you. Let him assure you with his fatherly love. Sample rejoicing prayer: *"Lord, when I forget the gospel I become dependent on the smiles and evaluation of others. I let them sit in judgment on me and then I hear all their criticism as a condemnation of my very being. But you have said, 'now there is no condemnation' for me (Rom.8:1). You delight and sing over me (Zeph.3:14-17), you see me as a beauty (Col.1:22). Why do I pant after the approval of the serfs when I have the love of the King? Ironically, I am being a lousy friend--because I am too hurt by criticism to either learn from it or give it to others (for fear of getting it back). Oh, let me be so satisfied with your love (Psalm 90:14) that I no longer respond to people in fear of displeasing them, but in love, committed to what is best for them. Remove my idols of approval--which can never give me the approval I need"* Pray this prayer when feeling hurt and rejected or one you write out yourself.

Unintentional Preaching Models

#2- Original
author's
message

#3- Theme
Fulfilled in
Christ

Biblical field

Our Lives

#1- Preacher's
Text

#4- How it
effects us

Types of Sermons

- 1-2 *Informational/SS lesson*
- 1-3 *Allegorical Inspirational*
- 1-4 *Exhortational*
- 1-2-4 *Systematic Theological Expository (Puritan)*
- 1-2-3 *Redemptive-Historical*
- 1-2-3-4 *Redemptive-Historical w/application*
- 1-2-4-3 *Preaching to the heart*

LOOK AT THE TEXT THROUGH THREE 'APPLICATION-PERSPECTIVES'

Vern Poythress in his new *God-centered Interpretation* takes John Frame's 3-perspectives of normative (prophetic), existential (priestly), and situational (kingly) and works this out for hermeneutics. He says that when interpreting the text, you do not know meaning of text unless you understand its author's original historic sense (normative), its application to hearers (existential), and its place in the history of redemption (situational). If you only use one of these three aspects, you make it an idol and it leads to distortions.

A. However, once you 'go into' the application to the hearers, you again have the three perspectives. Again, if you only use one of the aspects, you make it an idol and it leads to distortions. He calls these distortions--the '**Doctrinalist**' (mainly normative), '**Pietist**' (mainly existential), and '**Cultural-transformationalist**' (mainly kingly). I believe that if you hammer at just one of the perspectives all the time it leads to an implicit moralism that puts pressure on the will with guilt rather than on the heart with grace.

1. A 'Doctrinalist' looks to a text to see how it supports sound doctrine. This person makes the Enlightenment mistake that you can have objective knowledge without it being personal. The Reformed way to put this is that all knowledge is 'covenantal'. (See M.Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* and Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*.) Their basic gist is this: no part of revelation is given simply to be *known*. Everything that is revealed is revealed for covenant service (Deut.29:29) There is no neutrality--you are either in covenant service to God as you look at world or in covenant service to some other Lord. Thus Frame in "God in our Studies" in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. pp.81-84 is able to say that the way the Lord has structured knowledge so that you can only understand God's truth if you know yourself, and your world, as well as the Biblical text. The three perspectives 'co-inhere'. You can't really know what a Biblical text means unless you also know how it is to affect the world and you. In short, if I don't know how to *use* a text, I don't know it's meaning--so the difference between 'meaning' and 'application' is meaningless.

Many evangelicals, especially in the Reformed camps are afraid of subjectivism and of being 'man-centered'. They want to simply "expound what the divine Biblical text says, without regard to 'felt needs' or human concerns." But that is impossible. The minute the doctrinalist starts reading a text, he is doing so with particular questions on his heart--the last Presbytery debate he was at, the last books he read, a particular cultural problem--and thus the reader finds in the Scripture the answers to the questions on his heart. If the Bible is covenantal revelation--if, in fact, if all knowledge is covenantal--done in moral commitment to some 'lord' so that no such thing as neutral, value-free 'fact'--then application to felt needs is *happening* in every interpretation and preaching. So you better do it consciously, to the people in front of you, or you will only be pleasing your self or even solving your own problems in the pulpit, and starving everyone else.

2. A Pietist tends to look at every text as it relates to people psychologically and devotionally. . The text is applied to answer the questions: how does this help us relate to the Lord? How does it help our prayer life. How does it show us how to live in the world? How does this help the non-believer find Christ? How does this help me handle my personal problems? The pietist is the best of the three at looking for ways to preach a text evangelistically and bring it to bear on the individual's heart and conscience in order to get a 'decision'. Also, the pietist is constantly aware of how Christians are lose their internal spiritual grip on the doctrine of free justification and may be 'returning to the bondage' (Gal.5:1) to false savior-gods (Gal.4:8).

3. A Cultural-transformationist tends to look at the text as it relates to corporate and cultural issues, such as social justice and economic fairness and Christian community building. The 'Great Reversal' of the cross means that the gospel proclaims a complete reversal of the values of the world--power, recognition, status, wealth. For example, the gospel is especially welcomed by the poor and for the poor (Luke 4:18- *He has anointed me...to preach the gospel to the poor.*" Cf. also Luke 7:22.) Preaching the gospel and healing people's bodies are closely associated (Luke 9:6). Jesus points to the coming kingdom of God that will renew all of creation. The gospel creates a people with a whole alternate way of being human. Racial and class superiority, accrual of money and power at the expense of others, yearning for popularity and recognition--all these things are marks of living in the world, and are the opposite of the mindset of the kingdom (Luke 6:20-26). The cultural-transformationist looks at all things with this perspective.

B. Mini-examples

Matthew 8:1-4 (Luke 5:12-14; Mark 1:40-44) This is the story of the healing of the leper which comes at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in the synoptic gospels.

- The doctrinalist reads the passage and sees it teaching us about Jesus and the ceremonial law. Jesus both breaks the law (by touching the leper and then by not going himself to become ritually clean) and yet honors it (by telling the man to go to the priest.) Jesus is the fulfillment of the ceremonial law. In him we are 'cleansed' and justified. Now that he has come the OT ceremonial law does not bind us.
- The pietist, however will notice the love of Jesus in touching the leper. Jesus is the caring one who does not simply heal the body but wants to heal emotionally, to touch a man who has not experienced human contact. Also, Jesus exemplifies the tension in our lives in the world. We are not to withdraw from the world to avoid pollution--we much reach out and be engaged with the world. Yet, we must not let them be agents for our pollution--we must be agents for their cleansing. A hard task!
- Meanwhile, the culturalist focuses on the fact that the leprosy was a social status, not just a disease. Lepers were marginalized economically, politically, and socially. Jesus is incorporating a marginalized person back into the community. That is why he tells him to go to a priest and prove his cleansing.

Genesis 18:16-33. This is the account of Abraham praying for Sodom and Lot's family.

- The doctrinalist points out that Abraham is looking for a new kind of righteousness. It was clear that the sin of the few could transfer and bring the many into condemnation. (This is why whole families were destroyed for the sin of one or two members.) But Abraham is asking: could it not work the other way? Would it be possible that the righteousness of the few could be transferred to the many for acquittal? God's answer is positive! So Abraham points us toward our acquittal in Christ, when his righteousness covers us despite our sin and leads to our pardon.
- The pietist notices, however, Abraham's prayer. The prayer of Abraham is bold yet humble, specific, passionate, persistent. Here we have a wonderful model for our prayer lives. We should follow it.
- The culturalist, however, sees that Abraham is not simply praying for Lot's family but here is praying that God have mercy on a very wicked, pagan city. He is praying that God would spare Sodom itself! So here we have a model for believers seeking God for the peace of even unbelieving cities.

Which of these is 'right'? a) In the specific text, the author usually has one or two of these basic perspectives in view. So the preacher who tries to be true to the text does not usually need to 'get them all in.' b) But across the face of the whole Bible it seems clear that all three are 'right'. They are all in the Bible.

Most importantly, we need to use all three perspectives when thinking about any particular passage. Why? We all have our prejudices and will tend to 'screen out' our less favorite one(s) and often 'read in' our favorite one(s) even when they are not truly in the text. Reformed people are especially sensitive to 'therapeutic' and 'liberationist' ideologies and so they tend to screen out the legitimate corresponding Biblical themes. But we in the Reformed camp have our own imbalance. We still love the logical beauty of the Reformed 'system'--which in its traditional form almost surely owes something to the rationalistic age in which it developed. So we tend to be 'doctrinalists' only. Since by temperament we all have our 'bent', we should force ourselves to look at a text through all three application 'perspectives'. When we do so, we will often see many rich possible uses of a text that otherwise we would miss.

C. The Three Perspectives and the question of 'What is the Gospel?'

1. The controversy and the dangers. There is a rather significant and growing controversy going on about 'what is the gospel?' in evangelical circles today. Many people are saying that the traditional evangelical gospel is too 'individualistic' because it left out the 'kingdom of God'. More and more are saying, "the gospel is the good news of the reign of God, not the good news that you can have personal forgiveness and peace with God." (Much of this sort of language is inspired by the writings of Leslie Newbigin, N.T.Wright, and the 'Gospel and Our Culture Network'.)

This kind of talk is both helpful and misleading.

- It is quite true that traditional evangelicalism has been individualistic, largely because of a lack of orientation to the Redemptive-Historical perspective. It is quite true that 'the kingdom' is essential to the gospel. For example, the very concept of *simul justus et peccator*--simultaneously legally 'just' and yet actually 'sinful', the very heart of Luther's gospel--is based on the 'already but not yet' of the kingdom of God. Justification by faith is possible because of the presence now of the future verdict upon God's people on judgment day. When we are 'born again', we are born *into the kingdom* (John 3:1ff). So if you leave the kingdom of God out of the gospel preaching, you are being misleading.
- However, it may also be quite misleading for a preacher to simply say, "the good news is that the reign of God is here!" That can become a new moralism (a socially activist moralism) that tells people "God's program of creation renewal is going on, and you can join it." But how does a person join it? By just 'getting with the program' in some general way? By getting baptized and beginning to live according to kingdom values? This may end up being a new kind of self-effort. I doubt that preaching simply "the good news is the reign of God" is going to lead people to respond, "My chains fell off; my heart was free. I rose, went forth, and followed thee." Cultural-transformationalist 'overkill' could get us into the same stew the mainline churches are in. They have a wonderful social vision but they don't have churches full of deeply joyful, transformed and converted individuals who can work toward it. If we too much think of the corporate manifestations of sin (materialism, racism, militarism) individuals do not get convicted of personal sin and then transformed by a discovery of grace. Instead they tend to get angry at the people in the wrong political party.
- Nevertheless, if over-individualistic Reformed evangelicals don't preach and apply the gospel also in its 'culturalist' perspective, we will not be effective in a pluralistic, post-modern world. Our deeds of love and service, our concern for the poor--are important ways the gospel is embodied in us and will be perceived clearly by others.

2. Three Perspectives on the Gospel. I think it is important to see that the gospel itself (just like the Tri-une God) should be understood through three perspectives as well. Each perspective is true in that it eventually comprises the whole, but each approach begins with a particular 'door' or aspect. We spoke about this earlier in the course. This is a good place for a recapitulation.

The 'normative' aspect I'll call "the **gospel of Christ**" - stresses objective, historic work of Christ that Jesus really came in time-space and history to accomplish all for us. It will talk much more about the real, historicity of Jesus life, death and resurrection. John Stott. This view thinks that the problem addressed by Paul in Galatians was a doctrinal heresy.

The 'existential' aspect I'll call "the **gospel of sonship**"- stresses our new identity in Christ as adopted children, liberated from the law. It will talk much of the power of the spirit to renew broken hearts and psyches. Jack Miller. This view thinks that the problem addressed by Paul in Galatians was a pastoral one of Christians falling back into legalism.

The 'situational' aspect I'll call "the **gospel of the kingdom**" - stresses the reversal of values in the new creation. It will talk about healed community, cultural transformation, ministry of deed and justice. Harvie Conn. This view thinks that the problem addressed by Paul in Galatians was the lack of 'table fellowship' between Jew and Gentile.

We need all three perspectives, though each perspective is not simply a 'part' of the gospel. For example, the 'kingdom' perspective contains the other two. If God is king, then salvation *must* be by grace, for if we are saved by works, something else will be our Lord and Savior. Or, if we have a new identity in Christ by sheer grace, then we must not look down at anyone else, and self-justification is the basis of racism and injustice. If you go deep enough into any one perspective, you will find the other two.

3. What is 'the Problem'? There is a great danger of getting locked into only one perspective because we get obsessed with some too-sweeping analysis of what *the* main problem "in our world today". (1) If you think that subjectivism in society is the problem you will do the gospel of X and fear that sonship-gospel and the kingdom-gospel sound too much like the 'liberal' ideas. (2) If you think that Pharisaical objectivism is the problem, you will do the sonship-gospel with more emphasis on personal individual emotional freedom. (3) If you think the main problem we face is old Enlightenment individualism, you will do the gospel of the kingdom with more emphasis on working together sacrificially to transform power of the gospel. But aren't we facing all these problems?

Remember also that different groups and classes of people are in different conditions. With traditional cultures, the traditional evangelical gospel good, as it builds on a desire for historical evidence and a sense of 'truth'. Traditional cultures (with their share of 'failed Pharisees) often respond well to the sonship-gospel, as may 'post-modern' people who have a desire for freedom. Many groups with a high 'people-consciousness' such as minorities will respond better to the kingdom-gospel, as will many post-modern people who think more so in terms of 'sociology' than psychology (identity politics).

So we should be careful. Most of us are 'in reaction' to some approach to the gospel we think unbalanced. We must not over-react by getting 'stuck' in one perspective.

4. Major example: Application for the Story of Esther

"WHAT YOU MUST DO"

a. God calls us to serve him in intensely secular settings. (Cultural Transformationist)

This message is similar (but stronger!) as that of the accounts of Joseph and Daniel. We learn here how a believer can be effectively used by God in the heart of secular and pluralistic culture, even in the centers of its power. In all three accounts, we learn of Jewish figures who rise to power in an unbelieving society through their skills and talents--and then use their places to save their people.

This is a threatening message to many Christians today. There has always been a strong tendency among orthodox believers toward separation from the polluted, unclean, and morally/spiritually 'messy' arenas of politics, business, government, and so on. But Esther is a concubine, a member of a harem!

"Let Esther's harem represent every unclean political or commercial institution or structure where evil reigns and must be confronted. Believers are needed there....Our cities are full of dens of iniquity. Our culture is described as essentially post-Christian, secular, and often antithetical to biblical values and hostile to biblical virtues....[But] Esther gives us permission to reflect on our call to serve God within the matrix of a modern secular...system....How could God call Esther to be the interracial replacement spouse of a polygamous, pagan Persian king?....This book is off the screen for many evangelicals....We urban people need Esther now more than ever. Never allow it to be trivialized or spiritualized away, as it has been so often...." (Ray Bakke, *A Theology as Big and the City* (IVP, 1997).

b. God calls us not only to change individuals, but change society and culture.

(Cultural Transformationist) In each case we've looked at in this course--Joseph, Daniel, and Esther--God called someone to work for just laws and policies in a secular society. It is common for modern Christians to insist that the only way to change society is to convert and disciple individuals. If that is all there is to be done, then the 'higher' calling would be to go into Christian ministry. But the Bible shows us people who God also calls to work for social and "systemic" justice and peace in society. Esther used her position to have an unjust law repealed.

Ray Bakke (*A Theology as Big as the City*, p.106) reminds us that we must read Esther 'synoptically' with Ezra and Nehemiah. These three Jewish 'heroes' had three very different callings. Ezra was a clergyman, who taught the Bible to the restored community in Jerusalem. Nehemiah was a lay person who used his skills to literally rebuild the wall and infra-structure of Jerusalem to insure safe streets and a decent economy. Esther, meanwhile, used her position to work for just laws in the secular realm. Only all three people, working together, were able to rebuild Jerusalem into a viable city. One did evangelism/discipleship (working on the spiritual welfare), one did community development (working on the social and economic welfare), and one did social justice (creating laws that were just and allowed the community to grow). This was not only a lay-clergy leadership team, but a male-female leadership team.

This means that we will never see God's kingdom move forward with only evangelism and discipleship. We must also do 'wholistic' ministry that works on behalf of the poor and at-risk neighborhoods, and we must also have Christians in 'secular' jobs working with excellence, integrity, and distinctiveness. We need Ezra ministry, Nehemiah ministry, and Esther ministry--all together--if we are going to 'win' our society for Christ.

c. God is the only real King. (Doctrinalist)

We have noted that God's name is never directly mentioned why? The teaching is: God is sovereignly in control, even when he appears to be completely absent. The dramatic tension in the book revolves around a threat to the very existence of the Jews. If we put the book in its total Biblical context, we know that this is really a threat to the whole plan of God to redeem the world by grace. Genesis 12:1-3 tells us that God planned to bring salvation into the world through a family and a people, descended from Abraham. Abraham's people were to be guardians of both the true faith and the "Messianic seed" which would one day produce a savior who would redeem the world. A threat to the Jewish nation was, therefore, an attack by the world on God's redemptive plan. However, largely through a set of "coincidences", the Jews are saved. God's plan to save the world through grace is intact.

"What the writer of Esther has done is to give us a story in which the main actor is not so much as mentioned--the presence of God is implied and understood throughout the story, so that these mounting coincidences are but the by-product of his rule over history and his providential care for his people. It is an extraordinary piece of literary genius that this author wrote a book that is about the actions and rule of God from beginning to end, and yet that God is not named on a single page of the story." (Dillard, p.196).

What a vivid way to teach us that God is always present, even when he seems most absent and his purposes most 'opaque'! The message of the book is that God's plan of grace/salvation cannot fail, and though he may appear to be completely absent, he is really behind everything, working out his plan.

Because of this theme, the writer contrasts two conflicting world-views--that of Haman and that of Mordecai. Haman believes in chance-fate. He casts lots to determine the best time to annihilate the Jews (3:7-11). He thinks he can control history by the exercise of his power. The other world-view is that of Mordecai. He believes that there is a divine presence overruling history (4:14) who can use us if we make ourselves available to him, but whose plan is not dependent on nor thwarted by human power. "The book sets the two world-views in contrast and shows by the outcome which is to be preferred." (Baldwin, p.38)

Nevertheless, we are taught that God's sovereignty is not determinism. When the story is over, it will be possible to look back and see that so much of what happened was due to a divine power behind even the most mundane 'accidents'. Yet the narrator does not depict a kind of fatalistic determinism. Our choices are not determined apart from the responsible exercise of our will. Esther will have to risk her life and act courageously if the salvation of her people will be realized. We are not just passive pawns in God's plan.

d. Human strength is weakness and weakness can be strength. (Pietist)

Recent commentators have noticed the weakness of men and the power of women in the book. In contrast to the huge show of power in his great feast, the drunken Xerxes tries to humiliate his wife who in turn humiliates him. In response, he decrees that all men should control their wives when he can't control his own. The decree, evidently made when he was still drunk, only makes him look foolish. Later he appears to regret it on several fronts.

Not only is he 'bested' by his first queen, the rest of the book shows him being 'bested' by his next queen. While the king is revealed to be ill-informed, forgetful, impulsive, unjust, and unwise, his queen Esther is seen to be brave, take-charge, focused, wise, and just. Not only Vashti and Esther, but Haman's wife Zareh appear as 'strong and shrewd' while all the men (except Mordecai) appear vain and foolish.

Esther, of course, is the person who most of all stands the world's expectations on their head. First, she was an orphan, without father or mother (2:7). Orphans are one of the oppressed, powerless groups (cf. James 1:27). Second, she was a woman, and not a powerful or wealthy woman, but a concubine, the member of a harem. In the process of the narrative, however, she ascends from being an orphan and Mordecai's protegee to being a queen of great power, who makes plans and takes decisive leadership and who in the end is her uncle's guardian. Originally, her physical beauty won the king's heart, but 2:15 indicates that her character and behavior had won the attraction of the rest of the court as well. Esther comes from the outside margins of society and is used by God to do redemption. So again we see a very prominent

theme in the Bible. God does not work through the channels that the world considers strong and powerful. Instead, he works through groups (women, racial minorities) who seem powerless. The first shall be last and the last shall be first.

In a related theme, we learn that 'the one who would lose himself will find himself'. We learn that evil sets up strains in the fabric of life and backfires on the perpetrator, while faithfulness to God is also wise. Haman, who intends to destroy Mordecai and his kin, ultimately destroys only himself and his kin. This theme is especially achieved through the literary device of irony. The gallows that Haman builds for Mordecai becomes his own place of execution. Haman seeks to plunder the wealth of the Jews, but it is his wealth that fall into their hands. The reversal of role and of fortune that occurs so often in the Bible eventually finds its fullest expression in Jesus, who was exalted because he stooped so low. At the same time Satan is brought low because he sought exaltation. **Sum--**Do what you can to penetrate the culture. Don't live in a ghetto!--and when there, sever the Lord. Serve your people. Serve the interest of justice! Don't be afraid to lose your power, even your life, for God is the real king! Don't be seduced by human power, beauty, and acclaim!

"WHY YOU CAN'T DO IT"

Now how can you do all? You can't! If we end the sermon right here, we'll all be in despair. You don't have the courage to do this. You may get excited today about doing this, but your courage will evaporate quickly. And you may decide you are going to make all the risks that Esther made, but when it comes down to it, you aren't going to risk your influence and money and status to help people in needs. You just won't have the ability to do so.

"BUT THERE IS ONE WHO DID DO THIS"

You have to often go into the palace--but not be tempted by the palace! You've got to be willing to leave the palace in order to serve your Lord! (Ah, but why can't we? We are enthralled to acclaim and glory of the palace! How free ourselves? Esther's great temptation, once she comes into a place of luxury, comfort, and privilege, is to hold on to that position to the detriment of her people. When by God's grace we come into such a standing, we may be seduced by it. Mordecai had to challenge Esther and force her to see her choices. Salvation comes through Esther only when she is willing to give up her place in the palace and take her life into her own hands and risk it all in order to intercede before the throne of power. Again we see that redemption comes not by gaining but by losing, not by filling oneself, but by emptying oneself.

We also see, over and over, that we need a deliverer who identifies with us and that stands as our representative--as in the career of Joseph in Egypt, David before Goliath. So in this story we are led to see Jesus, who did not need a challenge to leave his place of power, who saved us not at the risk of his glory but at the cost of his glory, who did not say, "if I perish, I perish" but "when I perish, I perish", who had to die in order to stand before the throne as our intercessor (Heb.7:24-25). But the "rest" that Jesus brings is not one that gives us rest from enemies by killing them, but by winning them. After the cross, we pray for our enemies. Jesus has brought the barrier down between Jew and Gentile, Saul and Amalek. *We learn-- Salvation "rest" comes by the sacrifice and intercession of another.* We have one who was in the greatest palace of all, but who did not just serve his God as the risk of losing the palace, but at the cost

READING, PREPARATION, CONVERSATIONS AND PREACHING.

1. Preparing the preacher

I believe many of the best sermons are "discovered", not developed. In other words, great sermons often suggest themselves to you--they have a life of their own. Most preachers do virtually all of their sermon preparation--study in a completely task oriented way. That is:

They choose things to read that they believe will 'make good sermon material. They are always studying simply to find material for the next talk or sermon. And/or They do all of their study for the sermon in a formal set-aside time just a few days before the date of delivery.

Instead, there should be lots of "non-directed" study in a great a variety of areas. In particular, it is important to immerse yourself in the 'world' of the people to whom you preach. (There is more on this subject below under application.) It is as you study very broadly that unusual, creative new insights for sermons will come.

a. Routine ways to study:

Rapid Bible reading. Like Lloyd-Jones and John Stott, I find M'Cheyne's Reading Calendar an outstanding aid. John Stott suggests reading 3 chapters a day rapidly and studying one in depth. That is too much for most pastors. But covering the whole Bible every year or so is critical. Another example of this is the traditional course of reading the Psalms through every month or so.

Magazines across the spectrum. If you read one perspective on a subject you are naive and over-confident. If you read a second, contradictory perspective that deconstructs the first view you become cynical and discouraged. But if you read a spectrum of 4 or 5 different perspectives, you find your own view and voice and often get rather creative ideas. There isn't enough time to read lots of books across the spectrum. I suggest instead magazines--from liberal to conservative. I read the following magazines very regularly and very thoroughly: *The New Yorker* (sophisticated secular), *The Atlantic* (eclectic), *The Nation* (older, angry left-wing secular), *The Weekly Standard* (conservative but pretty slick), *The New Republic* (eclectic), *The Utne Reader* (new-Age semi-flaky), *Wired* (classic 'post-modern' if there is such a thing), *First Things* (conservative Catholic.) As I read, I imagine dialogues about Christianity with the writers. In that frame of mind, I almost never read a magazine without getting a scrap of a preaching idea.

Regular book reviews and then highly selective 'latest thing' books. If you always read *Books and Culture*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *The New York Times Book Review*, you will be able to stay on top of the trends of thought without buying 99% of the books. And this will help you actually buy and read the occasional seminal work. Another helpful spot is the "Arts and Ideas" section of the *Saturday New York Times*. Reading these reviews helps you identify truly seminal works or works you realize you need to buy to close a gap in your own knowledge.

Church history. Read the biographies of Christian leaders and the history of revivals and missions and of other branches of Christianity. This area of study is a real "sleeper", often overlooked by preachers. But such study helps overcome cynicism (when looking at revivals), or, on the other hand, helps prevent one from being overly impressed with your own insights and ministry. Church history also helps show you which principles of ministry are trans-cultural and which are parochial.

Sermons. Lots of ministers have libraries full of commentaries and theology, but not full of sermons, meditations, spiritual theology and other practical books. The fastest way to learn to preach is to be exposed to lots of good sermons by extremely different preachers. (This avoids developing a slavish imitation.) This goes for tapes of some modern preachers. Without this kind of material your preaching will be "bony"--full of structure and teaching without illustrations and application. I have either read or listened to at least 50 sermons by the following: Robert M'Cheyne, Charles Spurgeon, George Whitefield, Charles Simeon, Alexander MacLaren, John Flavel, Jonathan Edwards, D.M. Lloyd-Jones, Dick Lucas. I've learned a lot from others, but these have been my 'staples.'

Movies, plays, novels, museum shows. This is a never ending source of material for sermons.

Pastoral counseling and personal evangelism. Rarely you can actually use a particular counseling situation as an illustration--but that should only be many years and miles away from the person. You must not divulge private information (even anonymously) in such a way that people feel they can't trust you. However, I have found myself saying things to people in counseling every single week that finds their way into the sermons. I often am able to put things 'in a nutshell' better when spontaneously trying to help someone understand Christ. You don't say, "this week I was saying to someone" but rather you simply use the basic formulation.

b. Personal reading that has shaped my preaching.

Fiction and more 'imaginative' reading

First, **Tolkien.** *The Silmarillion* if you have read *Lord of the Rings* already. I've had people tell me that they have read *Lord of the Rings* 20 times, but in my case I'm sure its pretty far beyond that. Why? I actually never *stop* reading Tolkien. With whatever else I am reading, I am also reading Tolkien. I work through LOTR and then *The Silmarillion* and then (believe it or not) most of the other material JRRT never published but Christopher Tolkien put out in 13 (large!) later volumes. I owe Tolkien a debt I can't repay.

Second, **Lewis** of course. *The Great Divorce* and *The Weight of Glory*. C.S.Lewis hasn't helped me so much by his fiction. Despite some delightful passages in the Space Trilogy and lots of great sermon illustrations in Narnia and the Great Divorce--I'd say Lewis' fiction isn't terrific. It is too obvious. But his essays have been absolutely formative to my preaching in two other ways. First, he is the master illustrator. His crystal clear examples and illustrations in Mere Christianity are just too hard to beat. Second, he was of course an extremely clear thinker. Third, he was so incredibly well-read himself that he provided a model for me. **Note:** Because of Lewis' references I have read and re-read *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie* by George MacDonald.

Poetry. George Herbert *The Complete English Poems*. I am not a broad reader of poetry. The two sources I have gone back to over and over again: a) *George Herbert*. Can't say enough about him. I don't know how I found him--through Lewis, maybe? b) Because of Tolkien's influence, I also now love Old English poetry--Beowulf, Judith, The Wanderer, The Seafarer, and so on. I find it extremely interesting to see how Christianity was "contextualized" for the Anglo-Saxons in a poem like "The Dream of the Rood." Believe it or not, this has really helped me think through how to contextualize the gospel to people here in NYC.

More '**modern**' fiction. Camus *The Plague*, *The Fall*; cf. Becker's *The Denial of Death*. I have gotten quite a lot out of twentieth century 'modern' writers like Kafka (*Metamorphoses* and *The Trial*), Camus (*The Plague* and *The Fall*), and Arthur Miller (*Death of a Salesman* and *After the Fall*.) They have been extremely important for helping me grasp the 'alienation' that modern people feel. Maybe it's my age, but these early and mid-twentieth century writers seemed much more serious and honest about the implications of a closed, nothing-but-naturalism universe than post-modern playful irony. These books don't 'feed the heart' like other stories and poetry, of course. When I read these I feel like I'm trapped in a long, difficult pastoral counseling case. But I couldn't preach without them.

My '**Kathy**' fiction. I am basically a voracious non-fiction reader (see below.) My wife, however, is a voracious fiction reader. I apologize for living out this gender stereotype, but there it is. Kathy intuitively knows the fiction that I should read for my own enrichment and/or preaching. It is only because of her, for example, that I have read Yann Martel's *The Life of Pi*. Or Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones' Diary* or George Eliot's *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch* or Hugo's *Les Miserables* or Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation" and other short stories, or *Jane Eyre*, Stephen Carter's *The Emperor of Ocean Park*, or all of Dorothy Sayers' "Peter Wimsey" novels, Chesterton's "Father Brown" stories, Isak Dinesen's *Babette's Feast*, Madeline L'Engle's trilogy, most of Jane Austen, and J.K.Rowling's "Harry Potter." All of these over the years have been fed to me by my wife, and that is just the tip of the iceberg. (Kathy insists I admit that I only read about one of every five books she presses on me. She has read all of the 20 Patrick O'Brien novels four times and she can't get me to read one page.)

Non-fiction reading

It is critical to 'keep up' in order to preach in New York City. In general, my audience does not trust the Bible very much, and so I need to generously document and support my points with corroborating opinions from all the books and periodicals that the professionals of New York City read. If I read what they read, then a) I can use the Bible to answer the questions that are on their minds, not my mind, b) I can show how often 'the Bible already was teaching this' long before this contemporary authority said it. Some keys to reading non-fiction:

A couple of comments on non-fiction categories.

1) Though I never read much philosophy in college and seminary, I read it pretty heavily now. It has been like 'lifting weights' for my brain. Related to this, I read everything on apologetics I can get my hands on.

2) I have to give a special place to Jonathan Edwards' sermons. They are in a class by themselves. They are obviously not fiction, but they are truly literary art forms, marvels of logic and imagery. The Yale edition volumes with editorial notes are invaluable. Edwards believed that the goal of the sermon was not simply to make the truth clear, but to make it *real*. His goal was to strike the 'affections.' Watching him do this has taught me more than I can say for preaching to young, experience-oriented New Yorkers.

3) It is hard to know how to classify books like Nelson Mandela's biography, or a history of the Civil Rights movement, or the latest books on terrorism, or Alan Dershowitz's *Shouting Fire*. Are these 'current events'? I try to read these often.

4) When it comes to theology and 'Christian' books, I make a concerted effort to balance my reading among 'doctrinalist', 'pietist', and 'culturalist' emphases (to use George Marsden's famous categories.)

c. Preparing far ahead of time.

There is another key to 'discovering' your sermons. Spread your formal preparation out.

First, plan your series far, far ahead. Choose your topics and series for the following year before you go on your summer vacation. Then do an in depth, daily study of the book of the Bible, using three or four good commentaries. If you do these far enough in advance of the time you expect to preach upon it, then you are able to refrain from immediately turning every study into a sermon (though sermon ideas will occur to you every day.) But without the pressure of immediate final preparation, the Biblical material can really settle into your own soul and become yours experientially, so that the truth communicated will come from your heart.

Second, if you've planned your series far enough in advance, read (a) one major theological work on a theme that is crucial to the book or series (Example, if you are preaching through John 13-17, read a classic or new work on the Holy Spirit. If preaching through Galatians, read a classic or a new work on justification.) But also (b) read one major 'secular' or 'cultural analysis' book on a theme that is crucial to the book or series. (Example: if you are preaching through 'community' read a book on racism and the civil rights movement.) If you don't read widely as this, far in advance, all your sermons will start to sound the same.

Third, spread your *formal* preparation out as well. Consider something like this:

- On Tuesday, 10 days before the preaching date, spend 3 hours writing a very rough draft of the sermon. Make believe you have to preach it that night--an emergency.
- Over the next 9 days, think about the sermon and the topic as you go through the day, read the paper, go to movies, pastor and evangelize people. Almost everyday you will think of or see something that is relevant to the sermon. Almost every day you can put clippings or notes to yourself in the folder with the rough draft.
- On Friday, two days before the preaching, spend 3-5 hours writing a full draft of the sermon. If necessary, then do the same thing Saturday.
- Why spread this preparation out like this?
 - First, it gives you a chance to really test the message out experientially yourself. Be sure to work at actually practicing the very behavior you will be urging on others. Even more importantly, look at the world through the concepts of the sermon, through the theme of the passage. Pray through it and pray it into your own heart. This way, the truths become spiritually real and vital to you--only in this way can you preach with immediacy and spiritual reality. (This is the Personal Aspect of preaching, of course.)
 - Second, when you take a sermon out after a respite of one week or more, you will find that it does not sound like you remembered it from your preparation. Why? Because

you are now more objective--you are listening to it as a receiver (to a greater degree) rather than as a sender. You will notice tangents which (before) you thought were germane to the shaft. You will notice illustrations that do not really illuminate or enhance the message. It will become far easier to prune and streamline your sermon after letting it lie in the desk for a while.

2. Preparing the sermon.

a. How do you choose a specific passage to preach on? Various factors can determine your choice: a) church year factor (seasons), b) public life factor (events in the national or community life), c) pastoral factor (spiritual needs of individuals or the corporate body), d) social factor (dealing with needs of various classes of people), e) personal factor (subjects and passages God has brought home to you in a personal way), f) comprehension factor (taking pains to cover the whole range of biblical teaching and doctrine to give your congregation a balanced diet). Be sure to take all into consideration at various times.

b. How do you study a passage in preparation for preaching? Here is an outline for studying a passage of Scripture in preparation for preaching.

Flow. Read it through several times--5 to 10. (Do this in English. Of course, it is desirable if you can read in through in the original too, but unless you are a professor, you probably won't get a sense of the 'flow' unless you read in your native, heart language. if you simply cannot read well enough for "flow", stick to English!) What is the purpose? You are seeking to "fly over" the passage, the way you fly over a region in an airplane to get the "big picture". You are to look for the main features.

- Underline anything that impresses you, and provide a brief explanation of why it does. Note anything that puzzles you and pose it as a question.
- Now, write a paraphrase of the passage in your own words. This will force you to make decisions about flow--an important exercise.
- Finally, answer this question: what is the basic purpose of the author in writing this? what is the basic point he trying to make?

Parts. Only now, turn to the use of lexical aids and commentaries. Why should you wait until now? To turn too quickly to the views of the experts can make it impossible for you to develop your own insights. Now that you do--turn to the technical books, use at least a half-dozen (and preferably a dozen), to avoid one-sidedness.

- Use these aids to find the original setting--the people the author was writing to.
- Use these aids to add to your list of "impressions" you developed.
- Then use them to answer your list of questions you have already developed.
- Now divide the passage into parts (idea units) and give each a title. The titles is just another mental discipline to help you determine the author's intent. Make the outline a detailed one if you wish.
- Next, look for connectors within the parts and especially between the parts. Here are four kinds of connectors:
 - a) contrast (e.g. "but"),
 - b) comparison (e.g. "even as"),
 - c) repetition of words or ideas,
 - d) cause and effect or explanation (e.g. "because", "for", "in order", "therefore", "if" "then").
- In the case of each connector, ask: "why did the author use this? how does it help him make a point, and what is the point?"
- Finally choose the main things (2-3) that impressed you. Now meditate on each:
 - What is the teaching?
 - What does this tell me about God or Christ that leads me to praise?
 - What does this tell me about my fallen condition that I can confess?
 - What does this tell me about how I should life, rejoice, trust, or change?

Shaft. Now you are ready to return to your original question. In light of all the detailed study you have just done, ask yourself: *what is the basic purpose of the author in writing this? What is the basic point of the passage?* Of course, you already answered this question once, but now use all your study to refine your previous answer.

Now write it down in a single sentence, if possible. This is what I call the "shaft" of the sermon. (Jay Adams calls it the *telos*, while Haddon Robinson calls it the "Big Idea". Others call it the "CIT"--the central interpretive theme.) A sermon must be like an arrow, streamlined and clearly driving at a single point, a single message, the theme of the passage.

c. Writing the Sermon.

Now that you know the shaft of the passage, it remains to design a sermon outline or structure that preserves and promotes that shaft. Good sermon structure brings clarity. We must not be legalistic about sermon structure. I also do not intend this book to offer much detail on this subject. Let me simply propose one approach which preserves both a concern for a single, clear point and for application. This approach is based on (with just a few amendments) John Bettler's excellent chapter on "Application" in Sam Logan, ed. *The Preacher and Preaching*.

(1) Make the Shaft into a Sermon Proposition. Turn the "shaft", the central interpretive theme, into a practical proposition. The characteristics of the proposition are the following: a) Make it an active, declarative sentence (even with a second person pronoun, if possible). b) Make it person-oriented, "need-related". It should be oriented to a need and pointing to the satisfaction of that need. In other words, the proposition relates one central truth to the audience.

For example, suppose you have studied John 16:16-23, and determined that the shaft is: "Jesus comforts his disciples with teaching about his second coming." But it must be turned into a sermon proposition. Here is one example for John 16:16-23: "Christians, through hope, can face anything."

Here are some other examples of sermon propositions.

Concealing your sin is no security.

Regardless of your status everyone needs to be remade by the Holy Spirit.

Nothing will cast out fear except the gospel.

Communication is the key to marriage.

Men who are interested in religion as a theory often revolt from it as an experience.

(2) Ask the passage a question or questions about the proposition.

Now, we are looking for more information on this central sermon proposition. We get it by asking the passage a question *about* the proposition. We want to be sure to only get what the passage tells you about this main point. Avoid all tangents and detours!

What kind of questions should you ask? Your questions should be asking: either what, or why, or how or where or what for the need or issue (addressed in the proposition) is met (resolved, embodied, satisfied) in Christ. The question could be seeking to discover a) ways the satisfaction in Christ fits the need, or b) examples of how the satisfaction in Christ works, or c) concrete effects of the satisfaction (e.g. descriptions of positive conditions that result with him and negative conditions that result without him), or d) actions that will secure the satisfaction, or e) combinations of the above. Write down all the passage tells you and arrange it in an outline. Example:

John 16:16-23

Shaft - Jesus comforts his disciples with teaching about his second coming.
 Proposition - Christians, through hope, can face anything.

Question - (If we ask the text) *Why?* (the following outline emerges)

- I. Our Hope is powerful. (v. 21 - "she forgets the anguish because of her joy")
- II. Our Hope is grounded in Christ. (v.22 - "no one will take away your joy")
- III. Our Hope is permanent. (v.23 - "you will no longer ask me anything")

Question - (If we ask the text) *How?* (the following outline emerges)

- I. By remembering Christ's timing. (v.20 - "you will weep while the world rejoices")
- II. By seeking Christ's face. (v.22 - "I will see you again and you will rejoice")
- III. By reflecting on Christ's triumph. (v.17 - "Because I go to the Father"; v. 23 - "In that day you will no longer ask me anything")

(3) Consider different arrangements. Many authors provide categories of sermon outlines. Here are just three types that are common and helpful.

Faceting - The central subject is looked at in different aspects.

Luke 8:16-18

- I. A witness must be properly placed.
(v.16 - "on a stand")
- II. A witness will be a threat to some.
(v.17 - "brought out in the open")
- III. A witness must be informed.
(v.18 - "consider how you listen")

Mark 1:17

- I. The Duty of discipleship ("follow me")
- II. The Promise of discipleship ("I will make you")
- III. The Test of discipleship ("fishers of men")

Contrasting - The central subject is looked at in terms of opposites: good/bad, right/wrong, temporal/eternal, divine/human.

Matthew 25 - "Waiting for Jesus"

- I. The foolish maidens: are you one of them?
- II. The wise maidens: are you one of these?

Exposing - This outline begins by posing a question or presenting a problem or a controversial assumption. Then answer or solution is unfolded in stages.

Luke 11:1-13 - "The Problem of Prayer"

- I. The Problem of Prayer (v.1 "teach us")
- II. Prayers must be balanced (v.2-4)
- III. Prayers must be persistent. (v.5-10)
- IV. Prayers must be believing. (v.11-13)

(4) Amass and attach supporting materials. Now that you have an outline, you have the "bones" or skeleton of the sermon. "Flesh out" the points with supporting materials which you have amassed through reading and your own experience. Attach them to appropriate points. Here are some types of supporting material.

(1.) *Illuminating/persuading materials:*

- analogy-illustrations (which explain abstract concepts through concrete comparisons),

- example-illustration (showing how principles are fleshed out in practice),
- statistics and other "objective" evidence, and
- testimony (from experts, peers, or others that the audience give weight to).

(2.) Application materials. (See below).

Now, if possible, put the sermon away for at least a week before you revise it for the final time. (See above for the rationale for this.)

Summary for preparing a message that expounds a text:

1. Read for the flow.
2. Study the parts.
3. Crystallize the shaft.

4. Write the sermon proposition.
5. Ask it a question or questions.
6. Arrange the answers into an outline.

7. Attach supporting material.
8. Live with the sermon.

II. PROVIDE A BALANCED DIET OF APPLICATION.

It is extremely easy for preachers to ride application 'hobby-horses.' We all tend to identify certain problems as the major ones in peoples' lives or in the church. So we tend to find our favorite applications in texts so regularly that it becomes repetitious and boring. After a while people 'tune it out.' Application is like a diet—our people need a balanced diet of all the different food-groups. Obviously, if you keep a balance in application of the 'three perspectives'—doctrinalist, pietist, culturalist—this will help. But there's more to do to give your people a balanced diet of Biblical application.

A. Keep track of where you've been over the last year or two.

I have a number of 'gospel themes' that I try to provide for my people. I try to devote a sermon to one every year or two. I try to keep track of whether or not I've hit on the theme recently or not. If not, I sometimes choose parts of a text or book in order to cover a theme that I haven't given the congregation in a while. (In a highly mobile church, repetition is important.) What are the themes? I have 25-30. Some include: The glory of God, the holiness of God, sin, the incarnation, the cross, idolatry, the kingdom, the church, the Word, the City, prayer, worship, community, justice, witness, forgiveness, money, family, sexuality, work, discipleship, spiritual growth, friendship, contentment, humility, self-control, suffering, racial unity, integrity, guidance.

B. Vary the genres and parts of the Bible you cover.

I try to get through all the different parts of the Bible over a 10 year period. This way the basic themes will always be coming with a different metaphor, perspective, nuance, aspect. Make sure you don't always preach epistles or even always gospels! Hit the wisdom literature, the Old Testament narratives, the law, the prophets, and so on. It helps long-time auditors to grow deeper in their understanding of Biblical truths. They do not get bored!

C. Discipline who you talk to.

1. Your people-context always shapes your sermons.

When we study the Bible, we only extract answers to the questions that we implicitly or explicitly have on our hearts as we read it. If all revelation is covenantal, and we don't understand a passage of the Scripture unless we know how to "use" it (see Session 1-B), then there is no such thing as a "view from nowhere". We have certain questions, problems, and issues on our mind, and as we read the Bible, we mainly "hear" what it teaches us about those questions, problems, and issues.

Therefore, there is a "vicious" cycle in preaching. You will tend to preach to the people you listen to most during the week. Why? The people you are most engaged with fill your mind with their questions, which act as something of a "grid" as you read the Bible. Their issues will on your mind as you read and you will especially notice Biblical truth that speaks to them. Thus your sermons will tend to aim at the people who you are already have most on your heart. They will then be the people that are most interested and satisfied by your preaching. They will come and bring others like themselves. Because they are coming, you will meet more of them, speak more to them, and thus (semi-consciously) tailor your sermons more to them. The more you listen to them, the more they pull the sermon toward them--the more you direct the sermon to them, the more they come to church--the more they come to church, the more you listen to them.

At the very worst, evangelical preachers read and engage other evangelical preachers and writers. They read (and speak to) almost exclusively those thinkers that support their own views. Then the sermons are really only helpful for other seminary students and graduates (of your particular stripe!) It is not really true that some sermons are too academic and thus lack application. Rather, the preacher is applying the text to the people's questions that he most understands--other academics.

At the best, evangelical preachers read and engage other evangelical Christians. Then their sermons are really only helpful for other Christians. Christians may love the messages and feel they are being "fed", but they know instinctively that they cannot bring non-Christian friends to church. They never think, "I wish my non-Christian neighbor could be here to hear this."

There is then no abstract, academic way to preach relevant, applicatory sermons. They will arise from who will listen to. If you spend most of your time reading, instead of out with people, you will apply the Bible text to the authors of the books you read. If you spend most of your time in Christian meetings or in the evangelical sub-culture, your sermons will apply the Bible text to the needs of evangelicals. The only way out of this is to deliberately diversify your people context.

2. Deliberately diversify your people-context.

How? The first approach is easiest--vary what you read. Read lots of material by people who differ wildly from you theologically. The fastest way to do this is not to read books, but magazines. For happily middle class liberal/New Age culture, read *The Utne Reader*. For angry liberal/atheistic culture, read *The Nation*. For sophisticated, upscale liberal culture read *The New Yorker*. For cutting edge GenX liberal culture, try *Wired*. There are quite a few other periodicals that would do just as well. This is just an idea.

The second approach is harder--vary who to talk to. Pastors find this difficult, because most people won't be themselves with us. Nevertheless, through being very careful with your appointment schedule, and through being creative with your community and neighborhood involvement, be sure to spend time with people from a variety of spiritual conditions. Here is a partial list. Be sure that you do not find you only spend time with one kind of person.

D. Discipline who you 'picture'.

Now when you both read the Bible text and write the sermon, think especially of individuals you know with various spiritual conditions (non-Christian, weak Christian, strong Christian), with various besetting sins (pride, lust, worry, greed, prejudice, resentment, self-consciousness, depression, fear, guilt), and in various circumstances (loneliness, persecution, weariness, grief, sickness, failure, indecision, confusion, physical handicaps, old age, disillusionment, boredom). Now, remembering specific faces, look at the Biblical truth you are applying and ask: "how would this text apply to this or that person?" Imagine yourself personally counseling the person with the text. Write down what you would say. The effect of this exercise is to be sure that your application is specific, practical, and personal.

1. Quick-Lists.

At the very least, ask yourself: "What does this text say to a) Mature Christians, b) non-Christians, c) newer or very immature Christians?"

A second list to keep in your head easily is to ask yourself: "What does this text say to the 'four soils', the four groups of the Mark 4 parable?" a) Conscious skeptics and rejecters of the faith, b) Nominal Christians whose commitment is extremely shallow, c) Christians who are divided in their loyalties and messed up in their priorities, d) Mature, committed Christians.

2. Warning Will Robinson!

Important safety tip. If the person(s) you are visualizing are actually going to be in the audience which hears the sermon you are preparing, be sure not to use details that would make it appear that you are using the pulpit to publicly rebuke an individual. That is an unBiblical thing to do! (Matthew 18 and 5 tell us to go to a person privately if we have something against them.) You want your sermon to apply to large numbers of people, not just one. Use the thought of individuals to stimulate specific applications, but don't write them out in such a way to cause the audience to play a "guessing game" about the parties you are referring to.

3. Longer Lists (to get you thinking)

Here are the kind of different people you may be speaking to. Does the text speak to any of them? Use the 'pastoral diagnostic' list we spoke of in the pastoral syllabus.

Non-Christians

- Conscious Unbeliever -Aware he is not a Christian.
 - Immoral pagan -Living a blatantly immoral/illegal lifestyle.
 - Intellectual pagan -Claiming the faith is untenable or unreasonable.
 - Imitative pagan -Is fashionably skeptical, but not profound.
 - Genuine thinker -Has serious, well-conceived objections.
 - Religious Non-Christian -Belonging to organized religions, cults, or denominations with seriously mistaken doctrine.
- Non-churched Nominal Christian -Has belief in basic Christian doctrines, but with no or remote church connection.
- Churched Nominal Christian -Participates in church but is not regenerated.

- Semi-active moralist -Respectably moral whose religion is without assurance and is all a matter of duty.
- Active self-righteous -Very committed and involved in the church, with assurance of salvation based on good works.
- Awakened Sinner -Stirred and convicted over his sin but without gospel peace yet.
 - Curious -Stirred up mainly in an intellectual way, full of questions and diligent in study.
 - Convicted with false peace -Without understanding the gospel, has been told that by walking an aisle, praying a prayer, or doing something, he is now right with God.
 - Comfortless -Extremely aware of sins but not accepting or understanding the gospel of grace.
- Apostate -Once active in the church but who has repudiated the faith without regrets.

Christians

- New Believer -Recently converted.
 - Doubtful -Has many fears and hesitations about his new faith.
 - Eager -Beginning with joy and confidence and a zeal to learn and serve.
 - Overzealous -Has become somewhat proud and judgmental of others, and is overconfident of his own abilities.
- Mature/growing -Passes through nearly all of the basic conditions named below, but progresses through them because he responds quickly to pastoral treatment or he knows how to treat himself.
- Afflicted -Lives under a burden or trouble that saps spiritual strength. (Generally, we call a person afflicted who has not brought the trouble on himself.)
 - Physically afflicted -Experiencing bodily decay
 - the sick
 - the elderly
 - the disabled
 - Dying
 - Bereaved -Has lost a loved one or experienced some other major loss (a home through a fire, etc.)
 - Lonely
 - Persecuted/Abused
 - Poor/economic troubles
 - Desertion -Spiritually dry through the action of God who removes a sense of his nearness despite the use of the means of grace.
- Tempted -Struggling with a sin or sins which are remaining attractive and strong.
 - Overtaken -Tempted largely in the realm of the thoughts and desires.
 - Taken over -A sin has become addictive behavior.
- Immature -A spiritual baby, who should be growing, but who is not.
 - Undisciplined -Simply lazy in using the means of grace and in using gifts for ministry
 - Self-satisfied -Pride has choked growth, complacency and he has become perhaps cynical and scornful of many other Christians.
 - Unbalanced -Has had either the intellectual, the emotional, or the volitional aspect of his faith become overemphasized.
 - Devotees of eccentric doctrines -Has become absorbed in a distorted teaching that hurts spiritual growth.
- Depressed -is not only experiencing negative feelings, but is also shirking Christian duties and being disobedient. (Note: If a person is a new believer, or tempted, or afflicted, or immature, and does not get proper treatment, he will become spiritually depressed. Besides these conditions, the following problems can lead to depression.)
 - Anxious -Through worry or fear handled improperly is depressed.
 - Weary -Has become listless and dry through overwork.
 - Angry -Through bitterness or uncontrolled anger handled improperly is depressed.
 - Introspective -Dwells on failures and feelings and lacks assurance.
 - Guilty -A conscience which is wounded and repentance has not been reached.

- *Backslidden* -Has gone beyond depression to a withdrawal from fellowship with God and with the church.
 - Tender -Is still easily convicted of his sins, and susceptible to calls for repentance.
 - Hardening -Has become cynical, scornful, and difficult to convict.

E. Weave application throughout the sermon.

1. Use both "running" and "collected" application.

Application is not appended to the end of a sermon--it runs throughout. Nevertheless, a sermon as it progresses, should move to more and more direct and specific application. "Running application" refers to the fact that the every Biblical principle must be stated immediately in its "practical bearings". But as the sermon winds to a close, it is important for the preacher to "collect" the applications, recap them, and then drive it home by moving at least one step deeper in specificity.

2. Ask direct questions.

The best preachers speak to each listener very personally. That can be done by posing *direct questions* to the audience, posing inquiries which call for a response in the heart. Ask, "how many of you know that this past week you twisted the truth or omitted part of the truth in order to look good?" and follow it with a pause. This is far more personal and attention-riveting than a mere statement, "many people twist the truth or tell half-truths to reach their own ends." Talk to the people; ask direct questions. Be ready for the occasional person who really will answer you back! But the goal is to have the people answer in their minds/hearts--carrying on a dialogue with you.

3. Anticipate objections and questions.

If you know the people to whom you speak, you will know the kind of objections or questions they will be posing in their hearts in response to your points. So identify those questions and express them. This keeps up the personal dialogue and lends great power to the sermon. For example:

"Now some of you are likely saying, 'Yes, that's great for you, but you have faith. I wish I could believe in God, I have tried, but I just can't develop the faith!' But friend, your real problem is not that you can't believe in God, but that you are refusing to doubt yourself. You are committed to the "doctrine" of your own competence to run your life. And you believe in it against all the evidence! Come! Admit what you know down deep, that you are not wise and able enough to run your own life. Doubt yourself, and you will begin to move toward faith in God."

Look at the Puritans for models of this. They were excellent at posing "common objections" and answering them within the body of the sermon.

4. Provide tests for self-examination.

Do not underestimate the sinner's ability to avoid conviction of sin! Every heart has scores of time-tested subterfuges and excuses by which it can somehow rationalize away any direct confrontation with its own wickedness. As you preach, these are the kinds of thoughts going on in the minds of the listeners:

"Well, that's easy to say--you don't have my husband!"

"I suppose that may be true of others, but not of me."

"I sure wish Sally was here to hear this--she really needs that."

Therefore, it is important to provide brief "tests" for the listeners. For example:

"Well, perhaps you agree with me--you agree that pride is bad and humility is good, but you think 'but I don't have much of a problem with pride.' Well look at yourself. Are you too shy to witness? Are you too self-conscious to tell people the truth? What is that, but a kind of pride, a fear of looking bad?"

The "tests" of course, are simply "example illustrations", of the sort that John the Baptist gave his audience in Luke 3.

5. Don't pass by the "pliable" moment.

Often there come points in the sermon when it is evident that the audience's attention is riveted and they are getting something of what Adams calls an "experience" of the truth. Often you can sense that people are coming under conviction. One sign is usually the lack of fidgeting, foot shuffling, and throat clearing. The audience gets more silent and still.

This is a "pliable" or a teachable moment. Don't let it go past! Don't be so tied to your outline or notes that you fail to take time to drive home the truth directly and specifically. Perhaps you could pause, and look the people in the eye as they swallow the food you have just fed them.

6. Be affectionate as well as forceful.

Be sure, when you deal very specifically with the behavior and thoughts of people, that you combine an evident love for them with your straight talk about sin. Be both warm and forceful when dealing with personal questions--never ridiculing! If you ridicule a listener for a question he or she has just posed (perhaps) in the heart, you will make yourself appear haughty and unapproachable (and maybe you are!)

7. Use a balance of the many forms of application.

Application includes, at least, a) warning and admonishing, b) encouraging and renewing, c) comforting and soothing, d) urging, pleading, and "stirring up". There is a dangerous tendency for a preacher to specialize in just one of these. Often this comes because of a bent in the temperament or personality. That is, some preachers are temperamentally gentle and reserved, others are light-hearted and optimistic, while others are serious and intense. These temperaments can distort our application of the Biblical truth so that we are always majoring in one kind. But over the long haul, that weakens our persuasiveness. People get used to same tone or tenor of voice. It is far more effective when a speaker can move from sweetness and sunshine to clouds and thunder! Let the Biblical text control you, not your temperament. "Loud" truth should be communicated as loud, "hard" truth should be communicated as hard, "sweet" truth should be communicated sweetly.

Preaching to the “Emerging” Generation

1. Four Sorts of Apologetics

How do we recommend the faith to those who don’t believe it? And how do we do so *today*?

The answer to this question is complex, because of how fragmented is our culture’s consensus with regard to how we know things. What and how do we know and when do we know it? No one knows! “Post” modernity means (at least) that. Here’s my very, very, very over-simplified outline of western intellectual history:

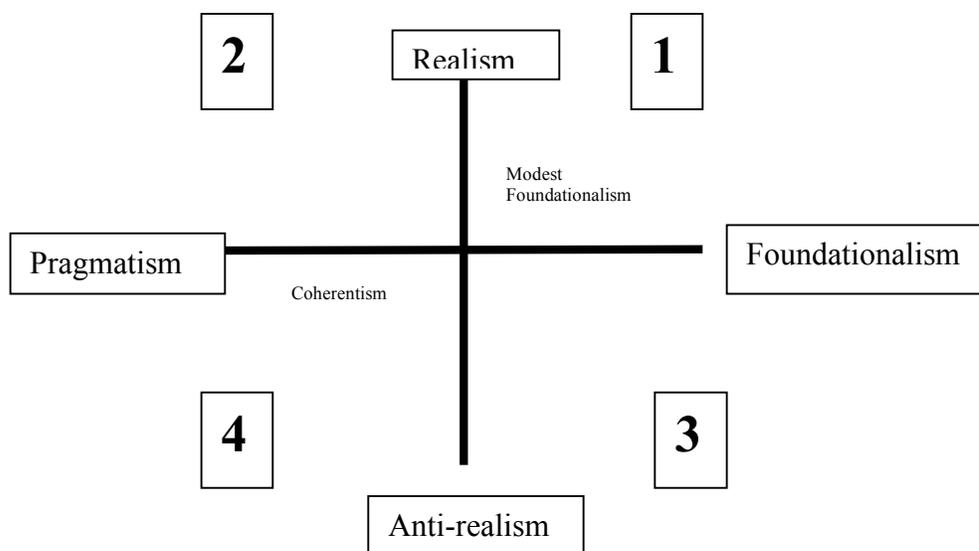
Pre-modern – We can know things truly through both reason and revelation.

Modern - We can only know things truly through reason, not revelation.

Post-modern- We can’t know things truly through either reason or revelation. I seem to know things (like this statement) but, honestly, I don’t know how.

The crack-up of consensus has led to a range of positions being formulated about knowing and I must admit it is confusing to us philosophical laypersons. From what I can tell there are two related but not identical debates. First, there is the “what do we know?” debate. This is the debate along the spectrum from Realism (“We *can* know a mind-independent reality ‘out there’ that all others can see too.”) to Anti-realism (“We can only know what our individual perceptions and/or our community tell us about reality. In some sense we form or construct reality with our language.”)

Second, there is the “*how* do we know?” debate. This is the debate along the spectrum from Foundationalism to Pragmatism. At one end is what we could call strong or classic foundationalism, the idea that we can only know what comports with certain foundational beliefs which are basic, which do not rest on any other beliefs at all. In strong, classical foundationalism the foundation is self-evident reason or direct empirical sense experience. That is, we can only know what we can indubitably prove through logic or empirical science. We could call this (as some have) ‘objectivism.’ At the other end of the spectrum is pragmatism. This is the idea that we can only know truth from very personal experience, if it ‘works’ for us. Many call this ‘subjectivism.’ Foundationalism idealized the observer who was completely detached from common everyday life while pragmatism idealized the observer totally immersed in common everyday life.



One of the problems with these debates is that only the extreme ends of the axes make much sense to the average person. The modern popular world was basically realist and foundationalist. (Extreme end of quadrant #1 above.) "Prove it scientifically—then I'll believe it! Otherwise it is hogwash!" The post-modern world is basically pragmatist and anti-realist. "If it feels good to me, if it works for me, then it is true for me. I create my own reality."

In academic circles, however, all sorts of more restrained and nuanced combinations are being generated. At one end of the spectrum there are very smart, re-tooled versions of chastened and modest foundationalism. The most sophisticated and successful proponent is Alvin Plantinga. At the other end of the spectrum more careful versions of pragmatism represented by Jeffrey Stout. A little further down the line away from pragmatism is are those who make one's community the pillar and ground of truth (Stanley Hauerwas, John Millbank.) And while realism tends to go with foundationalism and anti-realism with pragmatism, there are thinkers like Nicholas Wolterstorff who are realists yet non-foundationalist. Many would argue that pre-modern Christianity was there—in Quadrant #2, not either #1 nor #4. Within the Christian community there is no consensus about which of these various epistemologies are the way forward. There is a lot of confusion in the theological world right now about all this. Even the evangelical world is at loose ends. A good example of this is the volume *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn* ed. Myron B. Penner (Brazos, 2005.)

For our purposes I observe only that the populace is also more fragmented than it ever was about how we know. It is a mistake to think that everyone now thinks in a more narrative, experiential 'post-modern' way and has left rational thought behind. It is hard to characterize the corporate world and hard sciences in that way. But it is easier to talk of the creative world and the arts like that. My experience as a pastor is that people are 'all over the map.'

How then do we do apologetics? I see four sorts of apologetics for four sorts of people.

Hard constructive apologetics

I know there are still people out there who respond to a very rigorous, logical, evidentialist presentation of the Case for Christianity. I call it 'constructive' because it tries to build a rational case for virtually every part of the Christian faith—how we know God exists, how we know Jesus is God, how we know the Bible is authoritative, and so on. This is the approach of Lee Strobel in his best-selling books. And this is still the basic approach to apologetics in the Alpha Course—currently the most used evangelism program in the world. But I must admit that this doesn't seem to be the best direction to put most of our energy. There seem to be fewer people who think like this, and maybe Van Till was right—that an over dependence on rational argument for the defense of the faith cedes too much authority to human autonomous reason. Classical foundationalism, which was the basis for the older rationalistic apologetic, has fallen on hard times. Almost no one finds it defensible. Nevertheless, I'd hate to see work in this area die out. Plantinga's fascinating lecture notes "Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments" is impressive. Cumulatively there really are a lot of rational clues for God's reality. And I can't fail to mention the startling and remarkable work by N.T. Wright *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. This is simply the best historical case ever made that the physical resurrection of Jesus really happened. This has befuddled many of Wright's fans, who, being anti-realists and anti-foundationalists believe that an effort to make a historical case is misguided and that the only 'evidence for the resurrection' would be the loving Christian community. But Wright makes the case with style and power.

Soft constructive apologetics

There are lots of very smart philosophers who are now modest foundationalists. Plantinga in particular has formulated a sophisticated Reidian (common sense) approach. He says there are many things that are 'properly basic' that we cannot establish by argument but which we are perfectly rational to believe—such as the belief there is a past, that there is an external world, that our cognitive abilities are reliable. We can't demonstrate any of these things without assuming (using) them, so can't prove them but they are things we *can't not know*--irreducibly 'basic' beliefs. Plantinga says rather than see belief in God as something that must be established on rational or evidential grounds, belief in God is also 'properly basic'. Human

beings already know God is there. They assume his reality unavoidably in the way they live. This opens the way to a kind of active apologetic argument which seeks to demonstrate that. We can try to show non-believers that whatever they profess to believe intellectually they have some kind of sense or knowledge of God—and the evidence is that they cannot live consistently with their own world-view. This kind of apologetic is something like what Francis Schaeffer used to teach and practice. Both C.S. Lewis and Plantinga use a powerful form of this argument when they make the case that, in a naturalistic secular world-view there is no basis for trusting your cognitive faculties. Nancy Pearcey's *Total Truth* works to strengthen common-sense foundationalism and Schaefferian apologetics. This approach can be very powerful with a lot of young people who are still more oriented toward careful reasoning.

Soft deconstructive apologetics

Nevertheless, the soft constructive approach will still cause many people's eyes to glaze over. The discussion sounds too simply too heady. The chain of logic seems to go on too long. Also, the soft-constructive approach tends to set the agenda instead of responding to the non-believer's concerns. There are many Christian thinkers who think that any effort to make a positive evidentialist case for Christianity plays into the hands of those who want the gospel to bow at the altar of secular reason. Instead, these thinkers want to do what has been called 'negative' or deconstructive apologetics only. That is, we are to identify in any culture the main 'defeater beliefs' to Christianity. A defeater belief is Belief A which, if true, means Belief B cannot be true. Defeater beliefs are a set of beliefs in any culture that make Christianity seem implausible. Deconstructive apologetics answers the objections to the Christian faith but does so by identifying the alternate beliefs beneath the objection-doubts and then by showing that these alternate beliefs are weak or incoherent. This approach has a several merits. One is that it allows the non-believer to set the agenda. The apologist responds to the non-believers' 'beefs' and problems. Secondly, it fits in with the spirit of the age, which debunks and deconstructs. Deconstructive apologetics can be a great read. In general, Plantinga's movement of Christians in philosophy has produced a lot of excellent deconstructive apologetics. Plantinga and colleagues have struck almost a death blow (at least in philosophical circles) to the argument against God from evil and suffering. And Plantinga's work against the arguments of religious pluralism is also devastating.

Narrative apologetics

In the end, however, there are too many people who have been effected by the popular epistemologies of the age to read essays which make and respond to arguments. And there are many Christian thinkers who believe that there is no other way to do apologetics than to 'out-narrate' the alternate accounts of reality. Narrative apologetics means to simply present the Biblical gospel of creation-fall-redemption-restoration in terms and forms that resonate to a culture and capture people's imaginations. Narrative apologetics sometimes takes the form of highly personal 'testimony' like Anne LaMott Lauren Winner's *Girl Meets God* and Donald Miller's *Blue Like Jazz*. Or it may take the form of readable, wise, culturally engaged expositions of the faith like Debra Rienstra's *So Much More* or Becky Pippert's *Hope Has Its Reasons*. The Alpha program and its spawn are basically attestations to the importance of narrative apologetics. Alpha's basic course is just Christianity 101—a presentation of the basics of the faith, not a set of arguments making a constructive case for the faith. (The Alpha book providing answers to objections is very evidentialist, but that is not the substance of the basic course.) It is important to note that narrative apologetics is both soft-constructive and deconstructive in part. Soft constructive apologetics reasons like this: "*Christianity makes more sense of our common experience than alternative accounts of things.*" Narrative apologetics accomplishes this, though gently. The reader finds Christianity presented well helps her understand herself and her world and so she is drawn in. In addition, narrative apologetics is deconstructive, because (again, more indirectly) it explodes myths and stereotypes and answers common objections to the faith. Basically, narrative apologetics works on MacIntyre's thesis that *that narrative prevails over its rivals which is able to include its rivals within it, not only to retell their stories as episodes within its story, but to tell the story of the telling of their stories as such episodes.*" (from *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry.*)

Summary:

Hard constructive – *"Why believe Christianity rather than some other account of things? Because the preponderance of rational and empirical evidence is on its side."*

Soft constructive – *"Why believe Christianity rather than some other account of things? Because Christianity makes more sense of our common experience than alternatives."*

Soft deconstructive – *"Why believe Christianity rather than some other account of things? Because there are no good reasons for not believing in Christianity."*

Narrative – *"Why believe Christianity rather than in some other account of things? Because of the power of its story to change lives and to account for the insight of other rival stories."*

Conclusions:

1) We shouldn't consider one of these forms of apologetics to be 'the Next Big Thing' and therefore all the others obsolete. Our culture is fragmented and seems to be operating on different epistemologies. So we will need all the sorts for two reasons: a) There are all sorts of people. Some will only be reached by one method and some by the others. b) Many people need several sorts. Some (the more 'rational types?') first need the soft constructive and then (if attracted) the narrative. Others (the more 'experiential types?') first need the narrative, and then (if attracted) the narrative. Others (the most hostile or hardened types) may need first the deconstructive, then the narrative, and finally the constructive.

2) There are very few works like *Mere Christianity* which combine the forms. Lewis not only made a constructive case (using the moral argument for the existence of God and the Liar, Lunatic, or Lord argument for the deity of Christ) but he also narrated the Christian faith and life in luminous and remarkable ways. There are few books like that now. Though there are no Lewises around, we might do well to produce some books that do more than one.

3) Alpha, in my mind, does not do a particularly *good* job at narrating the genius and beauty of the Christians faith and practice. And it does not provide very good deconstructive and constructive apologetics material either. Others could do better. In the U.K. there have been five other similar courses produced. I wonder why that is not happening in the U.S.?

2. The limitations of the modern vs. post-modern categories of analysis.

- There is almost a consensus among suburban Anglo evangelicals that Baby boomers are more 'modern' but the younger generations are 'post-modern', and so ministry will need to change radically to reach the 'emerging' culture. Some of the polarities:
 - Moderns are rational/cognitive; post-moderns are more experiential and intuitive
 - Moderns are secular, anti-spiritual; post-moderns are more open to the spiritual, mystical
 - Moderns are more 'hard' liberal or 'hard' conservative; post-moderns are less ideological
 - Moderns are individualistic; post-moderns are more oriented to community and friendship
- These generalizations are largely true among Anglos, who went through a period in which our culture almost worshipped science and rationality and the absolute freedom of the individual over family and community. Now among some Anglos, there is a strong reaction against 'modernity'. There is a strong reaction to the very idea of 'objective truth' so the emphasis is on experience rather than information, narrative rather than propositions, dialogue rather than proclamation, process rather than settled positions. Anglo evangelicals seeking to create an 'emerging church' have called for 'non-foundationalist' theology that incorporates post-modern insights.
- But African-Americans, Latinos, and Asians didn't get such a strong dose of the Enlightenment even here in the US, and the people of Africa, Latin America, and Asia certainly did not either. The post-modern allergy to setting boundaries, to fixed doctrine, to persuasion-evangelism, to objective truth does not resonate very well with them. They are not as much in reaction to 'modernity' since they never were as rationalistic and individualistic as US-Europeans had become.
- Post-modernism in academic circles is now seen as a spent force. The European thinkers who developed 'deconstruction' in the 70s and 80s are seen as passé. At the Univ-Chicago in 1997 a major conference was held called 'After Post-modernism'. It posed the question: *If we absorb postmodernism...but do not want to stop in arbitrariness, relativism, or aphoria, what comes after postmodernism?* Paul Vitz has termed this new way "Trans-modern" ("The Future of the University: From Post-modern to Transmodern" in *Rethinking the Future of the University* ed. D.L.Jeffrey.) There is music, art, literature, and architecture trying to move 'beyond' both modern rationalism and the post-modern allergy to reason and love of fragmentation. (See J.Parker "A Requiem for Postmodernism--Whither Now?" in *Reclaiming the Center* Crossway, 2004.)
- The cultural reality in city-centers is that *all* the 'world-views'—traditional, modern, post-modern, and post-post-modern exist in significant strength. We should not imagine that 'post-modernism' is a juggernaut that will take over. Global city-centers are complex 'salad' bowls' of them all. Effective ministry must recognize that and not simplistically aim to only reach 'post-moderns' which will only be a slice of city-centers.
 - The traditional world-view will be especially present with first-generation immigrants who have made it professionally in the city-center and come to city-center churches.
 - The modern world-view will be especially present with middle aged people, and with those working more in business and science.
 - The post-modern world-view will be especially present with younger Anglos, and those in the arts (80% of which are Anglo.)
 - The post-post-modern world-view is seen in younger non-Anglos and in today's teenagers.

3. Some principles for preaching to contemporary people.

- a. Discourse in the vernacular.** in conducting worship, preaching, teaching, small groups.
- Post-modern people are extremely sensitive to anything that smacks of 'artifice' to them. Anything that is too polished, too controlled, too canned--seems like salesmanship. They will be turned off if they hear the preacher use non-inclusive gender language, or make cynical remarks about other religions, or use tones of voice that they consider artificial.
 - Do not avoid the use of Biblical terminology, but take great pains to explain such terms in ways that are readily understandable to those without theological background. Especially avoid citing the Bible or making explanations with tone 'Everyone intelligent knows this!'
 - Avoid-- sentimental, pompous, austere, archaic, colloquial, or emotionally manipulative 'inspirational' talk. Avoid 'tribal' language--unnecessarily stylized evangelical pious jargon and archaic language that seeks to set a 'spiritual tone.' (e.g. typical 'prayer language') Avoid 'we-them' language--disdainful jokes that mock people of different politics and beliefs, and dismissive, disrespectful comments about those who differ with us.
 - Instead engage with gentle, self-deprecating but joyful irony the gospel creates. There is a true 'gospel-irony' and realism that is a mixture of humility and joy. We also work to not 'run ahead' of non-believers in being so emotionally expressive that we 'leave them behind' or scare them. Unless all this is the outflow of a truly gospel-changed heart, it is all just marketing and 'spin.'

b. Speak to include both Christians and non-Christians in the same meetings.

- Keep emotion and sentimentality under control. The average educated non-Christian feels excluded by intense emotion in the service.
- Logic. Do not assume that the people out there all have the same premises. never exhort point "D" if it is based on "A, B, and C"--without referring to A, B, C. Constantly lay 'groundwork' statements about the authority of the Bible, or the reasons we believe, etc.
- Apologetic sidebars. Try to devote one of the three or four sermon points more to non-believers. Keep in your head a list of the 10 or so biggest objections people had to Christianity. More often than not the particular Scripture text has some way to address them.
- Application. You have to literally address non-Christians AND Christians, almost doing dialogue with them. "If you are committed to Christ, you may be thinking this--but the text answers that fear." or "If you are not a Christian or not sure what you believe, then you surely must think that this is narrow-minded--but the text says this, that speaks to this very issue."
- Ground teaching in cultural references and authorities your listeners trust. It is critical to 'keep up' in order to preach in New York City. In general, my audience does not trust the Bible very much, and so I need to generously document and support my points with corroborating opinions from all the books and periodicals that the professionals of New York City read. If I read what they read, then a) I can use the Bible to answer the questions that are on their minds, not my mind, b) I can show how often 'the Bible already was teaching this' long before this contemporary authority said it.
- In general talk as if non-believing people were present even if they aren't.
 - Always, always expect to be overheard by members of the non-believing press. Continually address concerns of the wider community, not just of the Christians. Show how the grace of God favors the poor, outsiders. Celebrate deeds of justice and mercy and common citizenship in the community.
 - Constantly anticipate and address the concerns, objections, and reservations of the skeptical or of 'spiritual pilgrims' with the greatest respect and sympathy. Always express doubting points of view very, very persuasively and respectfully before you answer them. E.g. Don't ever say, "The Bible says this!" without adding, "now I know that sounds outrageous to some of you—but I hope you'll consider this..." If you don't add that you make the doubters present feel invisible, like their concerns don't matter. (This must be a true spiritual respect, not 'put on.' If the gospel is affecting you, you will be deeply sympathetic with those who struggle to believe. Never haughty.)
 - If you speak and discourse *as if* your whole neighborhood is present eventually more and more of your neighborhood will find their way in or be invited. Why? 1) Po-mo people 'try on' Christianity through dozens of 'mini-decisions'. They want to see how it works. 2) Speak in this way and Christians will feel free to include church events as part of their friendship-building. Otherwise, they simply won't! Most Christians, even when they are very edified in church, know intuitively that their non-Christian friends would not appreciate the service. What you want is for a Christian to come to your church and say, "oh! I wish my non-Christian friend could see (or hear) this!" If this is forgotten, soon even a growing church will be filled with Christians who commute in from various towns and communities far and wide rather than filling up with Christians and seekers from your church's immediate neighborhoods.
- Solve people's problems with the gospel, not just with 'trying harder' to live according to the Bible.
 - How? At the root of all Christian failures to live right--i.e. not give their money generously, not tell the truth, not care for the poor, not handle worry and anxiety--is the sin under all sins, the sin of unbelief, of not rejoicing deeply in God's grace in Christ, not living out of our new identity in Christ. This means that every week in a different way the minister must apply the gospel of salvation by grace through faith through Christ's work. Thus every week the non-Christians get exposed to the gospel, and in its most practical and varied forms. (Not just in a repetitious 'Four Spiritual Laws' way.) That's what pragmatic post-moderns need.
 - More deeply secular "po-mo" non-Christians tend to decide on the faith on more pragmatic grounds. They do not examine in a detached intellectual way. They also are much more likely to make their commitment through a long process of mini-decisions. They will want to try Christianity on, see how it fits their problems and how it fleshes out in real life. They must be allowed that process.
- Sum: If the Sunday service and sermon aim primarily at evangelism, it will bore the saints. If they aim primarily at education, they will bore and confuse unbelievers. If they aim at *praising the God who saves by sheer grace* they will both instruct the saints and challenge the sinners.

Note: The above does not just apply to worship services. Everything about the church assumes that it is processing people (even many professing Christians) with world-views that are very different from the gospel. It will take multiple exposures to the gospel in numerous perspectives before world-view change occurs. We assume the presence of people of different world-views to be present in most aspects of the church's life. We don't, then, simply need churches that have evangelism programs tacked on to a congregation that in every other regard assumes the presence of conservative, traditional people, but rather *missional* churches. That does not mean that everything we do is designed to 'convert people', but that every part of the church is being contextualized and adapted to simply be Christian 'gospel people' of service in a culture of people *not* Christianized and who have modern and 'post-modern' sensibilities.

c. Contextualize the gospel so traditional, modern, po-mo 'get it' and are challenged.

The basic world-view of a person or a culture is an answer to the question: *What is really wrong with the world (or people, or life) and how can it be fixed?* Every culture has a world-view-story. The job of the missionary is to *enter* sympathetically the world-view-story of the culture yet *challenge* and *re-tell* the culture's story so they see their story will only have a happy ending through Jesus.

(1.) Show that the religious are running from God as much as the non-religious.

- Message: *The irreligious and immoral are running from God. But the religious and moral are running from God as much as are the irreligious. How? To think you can be blessed by God by being good is to be your own Savior and leads you to think God owes you (so you are in control of him.) Thus religion and irreligion are just two different ways of accomplishing the same thing--being your own Savior and Lord.*
- Exposition:
 - 'Religion' works on a principle of 'if I live like this--I'll be saved/blessed'. But the gospel operates on the principle of 'I'm saved/blessed in Christ--therefore I will live like this.'
 - Religion motivates through fear and pride; the gospel motivates through grace and joy. These are two radically different paths, though the adherents of each sit in church pews together each week—both striving to read the Bible, be good, pray—but for completely different reasons. Religion produces either superiority (if you've lived up to your standards) or inferiority (if you haven't) but either way you are driven by radical insecurity. And religion leads you to exclude others who are not as righteous as you.
 - The difference between a Pharisee and a Christian is not repentance for sins. Pharisees repent of sins! What makes you a Christian is you also repent of self-righteousness, your self-salvation. You repent not only for the bad things you've done but also for the reason you've done all your good things—to control God and save yourself. To see that and change that brings about radical conversion, puts your identity and all your relationships on a whole new footing. (See below under 2a for how.)
- Contextualization issues: a) The traditional need this message or they will settle into moralism and self-righteousness and think they have a grasp on Christianity. b) The post-modern and modern need to hear this message. Most people who think they've rejected Christianity have actually rejected some form of 'religion'. If they don't see the difference they'll never give real Christianity a chance.
- 'Religion' is the default mode of the human heart. Christians who know the gospel in principle continually revert to religion—they believe the gospel at one level but at deeper levels we continue to operate as if we are saved by our works, they continue to base their standing with God and their view of themselves on their spiritual and moral performance. This leads all sorts of anxiety, pride, inferiority, anger, and spiritual deadness.
- Every culture tends toward its own *kind* of 'religion'/moralism/self-salvation. Traditional culture makes a 'savior' out of family and being good; modern culture makes a 'savior' out of individual fulfillment; post-modern culture makes a 'savior' out of group identity and inclusion. All will lead to exclusion and radical insecurity.

(2.) Show that secular/non-religious are just as spiritually enslaved as the religious.

- Message: *Sin is building your identity--finding your greatest meaning, significance and security--in something besides God. Everyone is centering their lives on something and whatever that is by definition and function a) your 'god'—something you adore and serve with your whole heart and b) your 'savior'—something you have to have or spiritually and emotionally you feel totally insignificant and meaningless. So even the seemingly most 'non-religious' are living lives of worship, working for their 'salvation' though not expressing it so to themselves.*
- Exposition:

- This way to form identity leads (inwardly) to slavery because we are driven to achieve those things we must have to be happy. If we build our lives on human approval we are a slave to opinion. If we build our life on academic or economic or artistic achievement we are a slave to our career. In any case we do not control ourselves—we are controlled by the what we live for. When we make even the best things (family, work, romance, etc) into *ultimate* things and ways to get significance and joy, then they drive us into the ground because we *have* to have them. If we lose a good thing, it makes us sad. If we lose an ultimate thing (an idol) it devastates us.
- This way to form identity leads (outwardly) to oppress and exclude 'the Other' because we *must* disdain those who do not have the same identity-factors as we have. If you build your identity on being very hard working or moral you *must* disdain those who are lazy or immoral. If you build your identity on your social class or national identity you *must* disdain those of different classes or races.
- Jesus is the only Savior and Lord who a) if you find him, will fulfill you, and b) when you fail him, can forgive you. If you live for career success and you fail, your career can't 'die for your sins.' Rather, your failure will punish you with self-disdain all of your life. But Jesus gave his life a 'ransom' for us. 'Ransom' is the payment that releases from captivity and slavery.
- Contextualization issues: Modern and post-modern people must be given this (perfectly Biblical) definition of sin. If you define sin only as 'breaking God's law'—contemporary people will not be able to identify themselves as sinners. They will say, 'Well, but who is to say this or that is a sin? I don't think it is wrong to have sex if you really love one another' etc. But if you define sin more broadly as false identity and idolatry, as making anything (even a good thing) into an ultimate thing, then you give modern and po-mo listeners a concept of sin they are familiar with (addiction) and cannot so easily dismiss as irrelevant to them, because they *know* they are building their identity on something besides God, even if they believe in some general way in God.

(3.) Show how Christ's redemption restores identity and community.

- *Message: Both religious moralism and non-religious idolatry lead to a) an unstable identity and b) superiority and exclusion of the 'Other'—those who are of sharply different view-point and culture. But the gospel gives us an unassailably confident and gentle identity which frees us to embrace the 'Other' in love.*
- Exposition:
 - Religion *and* non-religion leads to an unstable identity (insecurity resulting in either arrogant superiority or fearful inferiority) because your significance is bound up in your performance or achievement. So you are humble but not confident when failing your standards, or confident but proud when living up to standards. But you'll never be sure you've 'arrived' and so you are always driven, nervous. But the gospel is that you are saved by sheer grace which a) makes you humble--you are such a sinner that Christ had to die for you) and b) makes you bold--you are so loved Jesus was glad to die for you c) at the very same time. You are both a sinner yet accepted.
 - Religion *and* non-religion leads to superiority and disdain toward the 'Other.' If your identity is based on being a hard worker you *must* feel superior to those you consider lazy. If your identity is based on being open-minded and liberal you *must* despise conservatives (and vice versa!) It all leads to exclusion. But the gospel is that a) on the Cross Christ fulfilled God's righteous law (so contra the 'relativist' mindset there are absolute moral standards by which you evaluate others,) but b) on the Cross he did it all *for* you (so contra the 'moralist' mindset there can be no superiority or haughtiness toward anyone. You are saved by sheer grace.) At the heart of the gospel is not a teacher whose standards we live up to but a savior who died for his enemies and opponents, for 'the Other' (including us.)
- Contextualization issues: a) Modern people in particular are concerned with finding the freedom to discover one's individual identity. Kierkegaard's depicts sin in *The Sickness unto Death* as 'building your identity on anything but God' which leads to psychological fragmentation and fragility. b) Post-modern people in particular are concerned with how we can live at peace in a pluralistic world. There is no religion with a more powerful ground-motif for accepting enemies and the 'Other' than Christianity. We are the only faith that has at its heart a man dying for his enemies, forgiving them rather than destroying them. This must be presented to our culture as an unparalleled resource for living in peace in a pluralistic society.

(4.) Show that the joy of grace is the key to change.

- Message: *Why do we do the wrong things we do? Look at the 10 commandments. The first and most primary is 'Have no other god-saviors before me.'* Implication: *You never break one of the other commandments unless you are first breaking the 1st. You don't lie, commit adultery, or steal unless first you are making something more fundamental to your hope and joy and feelings of worth than Jesus. So a lack of joy in what Jesus has done for you is always the root cause of any failure to live as you should.*
- Exposition:
 - When you lie, for example, it is because your reputation (or money or whatever) is more foundational to your self and happiness than the love of Christ. We always sin because at that moment at that moment we don't really believe the gospel—that we are completely accepted in Christ. We are looking to something else to be what only Jesus can be to us, we are trusting something else as Savior. Or put another way, it is always a lack of joy—a lack of deep joy and rest in Christ's love and work for us—that is the reason we ever do wrong. If we were happy enough, we'd not need to do wrong.
 - Christians may believe the gospel at one level but at deeper levels continue to look to other things besides Jesus in order to feel we can stand before and face God. Even after you are converted by the gospel your heart will go back to operating on the religious principle unless you deliberately, repeatedly set it to gospel-mode. This then is the basic cause of our spiritual failures, sins, uncontrolled emotions, fightings and conflict, lack of joy, and ministry ineffectiveness. The gospel is not just the ABC of the Christian life—but the A to Z of the Christian life. This is radical! You don't believe the gospel to be saved and then move on to more advanced principles in order to grow. *All* of our personal problems and church problems come because we don't come continually back to the gospel to work it in and live it out.
 - So you cannot change your heart just through will power, through moral reformation, through learning Biblical principles and trying to carry them out. Ultimately our hearts only truly changes as we use the gospel on them to change their basic ways of operating—to change the main things we put our heart's greatest hopes in, the main things we find our heart's deepest joy and glory in.
- Contextualization issues: Both modern and post-modern people have rejected Christianity because of what they perceive to be its inner joylessness. The gospel motivation for moral behavior fits neither the traditionalist's duty-driven view of life nor the modern/po- mo's self-driven view of life. It breaks the categories, because it calls people to 'die' to themselves and yet promises that the change will come from inner joy.

4. How to enter and change a world view.

The question in mission and ministry is: *how can I adapt my communication of the gospel without changing the content of the gospel?* If you adapt too much, you compromise the gospel, and if you adapt too little, you are adding 'the traditions of man' to the gospel.

Examples of entering/re-telling a base-line cultural story.

The Reality of God.

Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

Annie Dillard lived by a creek in the mountains of Virginia in order to observe "nature". She was horrified by the violence. She came to realize that nature was completely and only ruled by one thing--the power of the strong over the weak.

Don't believe them when they tell you how economic and thrifty nature is. Say you are the manager of the Southern Railroad. You figure that you need engines for a stretch of track...that's a mighty steep grade. So at fantastic effort and expense you have shops make 9,000 engines...you send all 9,000 out so they crash, collide, derail, jump, jam and burn---and at the end you have three engines left...that's the number you need for the run. You go to your board of directors, show them what you've done [to get those 3 great engines]. You know what going to say--what kind of way is this to run railroad? But is it better to run a universe that way? "Evolution loves death more it loves you or me [or any one]....I had thought to live by the side of the creek in order to shape my life to its free flow. But I seem to have reached a point where I must draw the line. I must part ways with the only world I know...Look: Cock Robin may die the most gruesome of slow deaths, and nature is no less pleased. The sun comes up, the creek rolls on, the survivors still sing. But I cannot feel that way about

your death nor you about mine, nor either of us about the robin's! We value the individual supremely and nature values him not a whit. It looks...as though I might have to reject this creek life unless I want to be utterly brutalized.

Either this world, my mother, is a monster, or I myself am a freak.

Consider the former: the world is a monster....There is not a people in the world that behaves as badly as praying mantises. But wait, you say, there is no right or wrong in nature; right and wrong is a human concept! Precisely! We are moral creatures...in a universe that is running on chance and death, careening blindly from nowhere to nowhere, which somehow produced wonderful us...This world runs on chance and death and power...but I cherish life and the rights of the weak vs. the strong. So I crawled by chance out of a sea of amino acids, and now I must whirl around and shake my fist at that sea and cry SHAME!...We little blobs of soft tissue crawling around on this one planet's skin are right, and the whole universe is wrong. The world is a monster.

Or consider the alternative...

Nature is fine...our feelings are just freakishly amiss. The frog that the giant water bug sucked had a rush of feeling for about a second before its brain turned to broth. I however, have been sapped by various strong feeling about the incident almost daily for years....All right then--it is our emotions and values that are amiss. We are freaks--the world is fine! Let us all go have lobotomies to restore us to a natural state. We can leave the library then, go back to the creek lobotomized., and live on its banks as untroubled as any muskrat or reed. You first.

Entry Point: A belief it is wrong for strong individuals or groups to oppress weaker individuals and groups. 1) We all know that it is utterly natural in this world for the strong to eat the weak. That is the very essence of how evolution 'works'--the survival of the fittest. 2) We also believe that oppression is wrong, that while it is perfectly natural for the strong to eat the weak, yet it is deeply wrong when strong human beings or human groups oppress the weak. **Challenging Point:** 1) But if nature is all there is, why would it be 'wrong' for strong humans to trample weak ones? How could we possibly know that nature is abnormal (??) unless there is some standard outside of nature (a supernatural standard) that tells us. 2) If your premise (that there is no super-nature or God) leads you to conclusions you know are not right (that my sense that there is moral injustice is an illusion)--why not change the premise? 3) The Bible makes sense of things: a) if there is no God, there'd be no way to know nature is abnormal, b) if there was no Fall, there'd be no way to explain why a God would make a world like this. But the Bible tells us the world is created yet fallen. If you say, a) nature is full of violence, but b) we shouldn't live that way--you are assuming and believing and living as if the Biblical God exists. It is not honest to live as if he is there and yet not acknowledge him.

Doctrine of Judgment

Arthur Miller After the Fall

For years I looked at life like a case at law. It was a series of proofs. When you are young, you prove how brave you are, or smart; then, what a good lover you are. Later you prove what a good father or husband you are. Finally, prove how wise, or powerful or whatever. But underlying it all, I see now, there was a presumption. That one moved...on an upward path toward some elevation where. I don't know what..I would be justified or condemned--a verdict anyway. I think that my disaster really began when I looked up one day...and the bench was empty! No judge in sight. And all that remained was the endless argument with oneself...this pointless litigation of existence before an empty bench...Which of course, is another way of saying--despair.

Entry Point: Meaning in Life 1) Citing Arthur Miller itself is an entry point. 2) Miller shows that we all need to believe in some kind of external standard in order to have meaning in life. We are working so hard--but for what? Unless there is a judge, some objective moral standards, there can be no sense of moving "upward" or forward. **Challenging Point:** The 'empty bench' is the secular view of the world. But to say that 'everything is relative' is to be shut up to your own endless internal argument, because you will never be able to stop striving. **Sum:** If your premise (that the universe's bench is empty) leads you to a conclusion you know isn't true (that there is no meaning in life, that there is no reason to go on)--why not change your premise?

Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace

My thesis is that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance...My thesis will be unpopular w/ many in the West....But imagine speaking to people (as I have) whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned, and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit...Your point to them--we should

not retaliate? Why not? I say--the only means of prohibiting violence by us is to insist that violence is only legitimate when it comes from god...Violence thrives today, secretly nourished by the belief that god refuses to take the sword...It takes the quiet of a suburb for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence is a result of a God who refuses to judge. In a scorched land--soaked in the blood of the innocent, the idea will invariably die, like other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind...if God were NOT angry at injustice and deception and did NOT make a final end of violence, that God would not be worthy of our worship.

Entry Point: Peacemaking; suffering of the oppressed. 1) One of our very biggest problems today is how to get people who deeply differ to live together in peace--how to stop the endless cycles of vengeance and violence. 2) Most secular people believe that religion only makes the cycles of violence worse. It would be better for peace if more people were religious skeptical like most Western intellectuals are. **Challenging Point:** 1) This is a naive view, held by people who themselves have not suffered violence. 2) If I am violated, only a deep belief in a God of justice will enable me to refrain from picking up the sword and rendering my own justice. 3) The only way to non-violence is belief in a God of judgment and vengeance!

Authority of the Bible

Traditional ways to 'argue' for the infallibility of the Bible are 1) evidentialist way of fulfilled prophecies, archaeological findings, historicity arguments of eyewitness accounts, etc. 2) pre-suppositional way of Van Till--assuming it as only way to explain life 3) moderate method of historicity--then faith in Christ--then belief in Christ's testimony to the Bible. But each of these methods tends to assume the listener is a modern, Enlightenment person whose 'story' is to live a life based on reason and science.

Alternative approach: Most contemporary people are allergic to the idea of absolute truth or an infallible Bible. *Enter the Story:* Desire for a personal relationship with God. Wouldn't you want to have a God with whom you can have an intimate, living, personal relationship? *Challenge:* But if you want a personal relationship, the other person will have to be able to contradict you. If a wife can never contradict her husband, you don't have a real personal relationship (e.g. "The Stepford Wives") Now, if you pick and choose what you can believe in the Bible and what you can't believe (on the basis of modern thinking or personal feelings), then how will you ever have a God who can contradict you? Only if God can be or say things that outrage you will you know you have a real God and not a figment of your imagination. So an authoritative Bible is not the enemy of a personal, mystical relationship with God. It is the pre-condition. Jesus related to God on the basis of the Bible. You won't be able to finish your own story without the Bible Jesus believed in

Election and the Sovereignty of God (See the example above under "Challenge")

Entry Point: A love of grace. If you have a God, wouldn't you want that God to be a God of grace, who loves you freely? **Challenging Point:** Why are you a Christian and your neighbor is not? Unless you say, "just because God opened my heart", then you have to say that you are a Christian because you are (even slightly) more open, more repentant, more humble.

Entry Point: A desire to respect the 'other'. Don't you want your relationship to God to humble you and provide a basis for respect and mutuality with 'the other'--the person of other faiths and cultures? **Challenging Point:** If I believe I am predestined--then when I talk to a non-Christian, there can be no superiority. This person could be far more wonderful, moral, wise than me. Other religions lead you to believe that in some way you must be superior--because you believe and the others do not. But election leads us to absolute respect for the 'other', the unbeliever.

Entry Point: A love of mystery. "Well, but then this is unfair." Absolutely right that this is a problem. **Challenging Point:** But the problem mainly comes because of a premise that you have sneaked in. You figure that if God doesn't open hearts on the basis of merit, that therefore his choices are arbitrary. But here's where mystery comes in. I don't know how, but when we see the whole picture, we won't think he's been unwise or unfair but completely wise and fair. So say the prophets and the apostles.

Reality of Hell

Entry Point: Freedom. **Challenging Point:** The C.S.Lewis depiction of hell in *The Great Divorce* in which the people trapped in hell are there through denial, delusion, and self-inflicted misery analogous to addictions. Understand sin as slavery. The wages of sin is slavery, blindness, bondage. We see it on earth. Hell is just the same dynamic stretched out eternally, because we go on forever. God holds

people responsible enough and lets them be free enough to create their own eternal misery through choosing the proud and selfish way.

Entry Point: The Love of God and Grace. **Challenging Point:** "I don't believe that God would let anyone go to hell. I don't think hell is the consequence of sin." Ask them: "What did it cost your God, then, to love us and embrace us? Where was his agony, the nails and thorns? What did he have to do in order to love us?" The only answer is "I don't think that was necessary". How ironic. In the effort to make God more loving (by removing hell as the punishment for sin) you have made him less loving. The worship of any God-without-hell will be ethical, cognitive, impersonal. You can be grateful that he is so accepting, but you will not respond to him with passion and intensity and wonder. His love is *not* "so amazing, so divine--demands my soul, my life, my all". The 'sensitive' approach to hell makes God impersonal. The classical Christian God, however, has to suffer on the cross to save us from the inevitable consequence of sin--hell.

The Uniqueness of Christ.

Entry Point: Inclusivity. **Challenging Point:** This is the only way to believe in grace without universalism. If you don't have to believe in Jesus, then good works is enough. And if good works is enough, then the way God accepts people is performance. Somewhere there is a 'cut off' point for moral performance, or goodness of heart, etc. That is quite exclusive. What if you were born into an abusive family? What chance do you have for being a kind, nice person? It's not fair. The Jesus-gospel is the only religion that even claims justification by grace/faith alone. Not "the good are in and the bad are out", but the humble are in and the proud are out.

Entry Point: Humility; honesty. "How can you say that your way is right and everyone else's is wrong?" **Challenging Point:** But you are doing the same thing only worse. Example: Are religions all like the blind men describing the elephant--each one sensing only part of the elephant, but no one seeing the whole truth? Or are religions all like a road to the top of the mountain, taking different paths but reaching the same summit? The only way you could tell these parables is if you can see the whole elephant or you are at the summit. In other words, you are saying, "my relativistic way is right and you are wrong." Your position assumes greater spiritual knowledge than any of the world's religions. You are saying, "my take on religious reality is right, and yours is wrong"--and yet you tell Christians they cannot say the same thing. At least Christians are being honest about their 'exclusivism' but you are not.

The Hypocrisy of Cynicism.

C.S.Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*

You cannot go on explaining away forever, or you will find that you have explained explanation itself away. You cannot go on 'seeing through' things forever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something [else] through it. It is good that you can see through a window, because the garden beyond is opaque. But if you see through everything, then everything is transparent, and a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. So to 'see through' all things is the same as not to see.

Entry Point: Need not to be taken in; Disdain for sentimentality. Christianity is not religion! Religion says people are either good or bad. Religion says you can improve yourself if you try really, really hard. Religion and moralism leads to 'inspirationalism', and sentimentality and a denial of the frustration and disappointment and relentless brokenness of life. But the alternative to religion can never be deep irreligion and cynicism. **Challenging Point:** 1) But the answer is not a universal cynicism. There is no such thing. 2) Hiding in the heart of the average cynical doubter is a deep faith in your own competence to determine all truth. 3) They hypocrisy of 'committing to nothing' is revealed if you think out the implications of your claims. If, as Nietzsche says, all truth claims are really just power grabs, then so is his, so why listen to him at all? If, as Freud says, all views of God are really just psychological projections to deal with our guilt and insecurity, then so is his, so why list to him at all? If, as the evolutionary psychologists say, what my brain tells me about morality, love, and beauty is not real--chemical reactions designed to pass on my genetic code--then so is what *their* brains tell them about world, so why listen to them at all? *In end, to see through everything is not to see.* 4) Cynicism lives only by refusing to apply the same razor edge to itself as it does to all else. Hiding deep inside its cover of non-commitment is a powerful faith in your own ability to judge right from wrong, to de-construct all phoniness.

The doctrine of sin

a. *Sin as disordered love*

First, sin is building your identity on anything but God leads, which always leads internally to dislocation, disorder, and enslavement. What do we mean by that?

The future addict takes a substance that he knows could destroy him. As time goes on, the more he sees himself being destroyed by it, the more he gives himself to it for reasons that no one, including he himself, can explain. Finally he is locked in. He dies unless the enslavement is broken by (what the recovery world calls) "a higher power." In the same way, the human race is hopelessly addicted to things which are terrible for us—the pursuit of power, greed, pleasure at the expense of others, and so on. Our race is like a drug addict writ large. Why? The Danish writer Isak Dinesen (almost certainly taking her cues from Kierkegaard) wrote: "*Pride is faith in the idea God had when he made us. People who are not aware of any idea God had in the making of them....have got to accept as success what others warrant to be so, and to take their happiness, even their own selves, at the quotation of the day.*" She re-states Kierkegaard's view of faith. Christian faith is 'pride' (today we would probably use the tired term 'self-esteem') that comes by building our identity on what God's love and value of us. Those who are not rooted deeply in that knowledge have to choose some other thing to ground their pride or identity in. But when you do that, you become a slave to it. As Dinesen says, whatever it is, you have got to have it. When we make things that are good into things that are *ultimate* to us--when they become what makes us desirable and significant more than God--then they set the course of our lives, *they* define us, *they* are the thing to live for, *they* give us security and worth, *they* control our lives. Without them we have no worth or purpose, so we *have got* to have them. If something blocks us from getting them, we get uncontrollably angry and bitter. If something only threatens them, we get uncontrollably anxious and fearful. If we ourselves fail to achieve them, we get uncontrollably guilty, ashamed, or despondent. It is an illusion, therefore, to think that anyone is really 'free and independent.' We do not control ourselves, we are controlled by whatever we build our identity on."

b. *Sin as exclusion*

Second, sin is exclusion. When we build on identity on some factor that we have achieved, then we form and bolster our sense of self-worth by despising those without our main identity-factor--the 'Other.' If your identity and self-worth is mainly based on how hard you work, you *have* to despise those who you perceive as lazy. Or if your identity and sense of significance is mainly based on your morality, then you *must* look down on those who you perceive as immoral. Or if your main source of significance is that you are a tolerant, inclusive person working for the rights of others, you *must* look down upon those who in your view are intolerant or bigoted. But a Christian says: "I am loved because when I was believing all the wrong things, Jesus came and entered into my reality, took on the weakness of my human nature, radically re-adjusted his life for me, and died for me." A Christian's self worth is based on the one who *was* excluded for us—Jesus was socially and spiritually cast out. Now we are free disagree even sharply with people and yet do so without any ill will, without the need to withdraw or exercise power in the relationships with them. You have the power to disagree with love, respect, deference and humility, with no inner need to win the argument.

Explaining the necessity of the atonement

Why is there need for atonement? Why does Christianity say that Jesus had to die in order for us to be re-united with God? *Why can't God just forgive us?* The answer is that no one can "just" forgive any serious wrong. If someone has betrayed you deeply and caused great harm--how do you forgive them? Forgiveness means refusing vengeful actions when you deeply want to make them pay for what they did. It means refusing to 'run them down' to others when you deeply want to slice up and ruin their reputation. It means even refusing thoughts of ill-will and rather turning your thoughts to pity and hope for their change. And as time goes on--if you stay this course, the anger will go away and the forgiveness is complete.

As anyone knows who has ever tried it--this is extremely painful, costly, and agonizing. If you do not forgive, you become hard and angry yourself, and a cycle of revenge and conflict goes on and on--so evil triumphs. On the other hand, if you do go the way of forgiveness, you will experience a great deal of pain and suffering yourself. There is no middle ground. Either you can make the perpetrator pay down the debt you feel (as you take it out of his hide in vengeance!) in which case evil wins--or you will absorb the debt yourself. It is the same in

the economic realm as in the psychological realm. If someone knocks over your \$100 lamp and says, "I'm so sorry" and you say "forget it!" you have forgiven them. But the \$100 debt does not vanish into thin air. Either you make them pay it or you absorb it yourself (by buying a new lamp or going without light in that corner.) So we see this principle—that when a serious wrong is committed, there is a "debt" that cannot be ignored or dismissed but must be dealt with, and that it must be dealt with through suffering.

Now, if we see this principle at our human level—that only way to defeat evil is through forgiveness that entails suffering—why are we surprised when we hear God telling us it is the same with him? (If he made us it only makes sense that there would be a strong echo of his nature in us.) If when we are wronged we sense a debt cannot be just willed away, that must be paid for with suffering--how much more is God aware of the enormous debt of human beings' sin against one another and against the creation and against God himself. Either there must be judgment so that we suffer, or there must be forgiveness so God must suffer! There is no middle way. He cannot "just forgive" either. On the cross, God paid the debt himself. There we see at the spiritual and cosmic level what we know unavoidably at the psychological and relational level.

"The Dream of the Rood": Example of 'Entering' but 'Retelling' a Culture's Story

I was reared up, a rood. Then I saw, marching toward me, mankind's brave King. The young Hero-- who was God almighty--stripped Himself, eager to mount the gallows, unafraid of the sign to many: He would set free mankind. I raised the great King, liege lord of the heavens. They drove me through with dark nails: on me are the deep wounds manifest, wide-mouthed hate-dents. I shook when his arms embraced me but I durst not bow to the ground. Stand fast I must.

How they mocked at us both! I was all moist with blood sprung from the Man's side after he sent forth His soul. Darkness covered the bright radiance of the Ruler's body. Shadows lowered, dark under the clouds. They lifted Him down from the leaden pain, left me standing in a sweat of blood. I was all wounded with shafts. They set to contrive Him a tomb, carved it of bright stone, laid in it the Bringer of victory, spent from the great struggle. They began to speak the grief-song. Their hearts were sick to death, their most high Prince they left to rest there with scant retinue.

He tasted death; nevertheless, the Lord arose in His great might to succor men. Then He ascended into Heaven. He shall return again to earth, seeking out mankind, on Doomsday. May the Lord be our friend, He who once suffered on the gallows-tree. The Son, mighty in battle, came back victorious.

-- The Dream of the Rood (the Cross) 8th cent. A.D.

5. Dealing with Defeaters

a) The other religions. Christians seem to greatly over-play the differences between their faith and all the other ones. Though millions of people in other religions say they have encountered God, have built marvelous civilizations and cultures, and have had their lives and characters changed by their experience of faith, Christians insist that only they go to heaven—that their religion is the only one that is 'right' and true. The exclusivity of this is breath taking. It also appears to many to be a threat to international peace.

Brief response: Inclusivism is really covert exclusivism.

It is common to hear people say: "No one should insist their view of God better than all the rest. Every religion is equally valid." But what you just said could only be true if: a) there is no God at all, or b) God is an impersonal force that doesn't care what your doctrinal beliefs about him are. So as you speak you are assuming (by faith!) a very particular view of God and you are pushing it as better than the rest! That is at best inconsistent and at worst hypocritical, since you are doing the very thing you are forbidding. To say "all religions are equally valid" is itself a very white, western view based in the European enlightenment's idea of knowledge and values. Why should that view be privileged over anyone else's?

b) Evil and suffering. Christianity teaches the existence of an all-powerful, all-good and loving God. But how can that belief be reconciled with the horrors that occur daily? If there is a God, he must be either all-powerful but not good enough to want an end to evil and

suffering, or he's all-good but not powerful enough to bring an end to evil and suffering. Either way the God of the Bible couldn't exist. For many people, this is not only an intellectual conundrum but also an intensely personal problem. Their own personal lives are marred by tragedy, abuse, and injustice.

Brief response: If God himself has suffered our suffering isn't senseless.

a) 1st, if you have a God great and transcendent enough to be mad at because he hasn't stopped evil and suffering in the world, then you have to (at the same moment) have a God great and transcendent enough to have good reasons for allowing it to continue that you can't know. (You can't have it both ways.) b) 2nd, though we don't know the reasons why he allows it to continue, he can't be indifferent or un-caring, because the Christian God (unlike the gods of all the other religions) takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he is willing to get involved with it himself. On the cross, Jesus suffered with us.

c) The ethical straitjacket. In Christianity the Bible and the church dictate everything that a Christian must believe, feel, and do. Christians are not encouraged to make their own moral decisions, or to think out their beliefs or patterns of life for themselves. In a fiercely pluralistic society there are too many options, too many cultures, too many personality differences for this approach. We *must* be free to choose for ourselves how to live—this is the only truly authentic life. We should only feel guilty if we are not being true to ourselves—to our own chosen beliefs and practices and values and vision for life.

Brief response: Individual creation of truth removes the right to moral outrage.

1) Aren't there any people in the world who are doing things you believe are *wrong* that they should stop doing no matter what they believe inside about right and wrong? Then you *do* believe that there is some kind of moral obligation that people should abide by and which stands in judgment over their internal choices and convictions. So what is wrong with Christians doing that? 2) No one is really free anyway. We all have to live for something, and whatever our ultimate meaning in life is (whether approval, achievement, a love relationship, our work) it is basically our 'lord' and master. Everyone is ultimately in a spiritual straitjacket. Even the most independent people are dependent on their independence and so can't commit. Christianity gives you a lord and master who forgives and dies for you.

d) The record of Christians. Every religion will have its hypocrites of course. But it seems that the *most* fervent Christians are the most condemning, exclusive, and intolerant. The church has a history of supporting injustices, of destroying culture, of oppression. And there are so many people who are not Christian (or not religious at all) who appear to be much more kind, caring, and indeed moral than so many Christians. If Christianity is *the* true religion—then why this be? Why would so much oppression have been carried out over the centuries in the name of Christ and with the support of the church?

Brief response: The solution to injustices is not less but deeper Christianity

1) There *have* been terrible abuses. But if you seek to move out of Christianity into some other worldview, you will find that the human heart can and has twisted every single one into violence whether Buddhism (WWII Japan) or secularism (Khymer Rouge, Stalin) or a return to paganism (WWII Germany) or Islam. 2) In Christianity, however, the prophets and the gospels we are given tools for a devastating critique of moralistic religion. Scholars have shown that Marx and Nietzsche's critique of religion relied on the ideas of the prophets. So despite its abuses, Christianity provides perhaps greater tools than the other religions do for its own critique. 2) When Martin Luther King, Jr confronted terrible abuses by the white church he did not call them to loosen their Christian commitments. He used the Bible's provision for church self-critique and called them to truer, firmer, deeper Christianity.

e) The angry God. Christianity seems to be built around the concept of a condemning, judgmental deity. For example, there's the cross—the teaching that the murder of one man (Jesus) leads to the forgiveness of others. But why can't God just forgive us? The God of Christianity seems a left-over from primitive religions where peevish gods demanded blood in order to assuage their wrath.

Brief response: On the cross God does not demand our blood but offers his own.

1) All forgiveness of any deep wrong and injustice entails suffering on the forgiver's part. If someone truly wrongs you, because of our deep sense of justice, we can't just shrug it off. We sense there's a 'debt.' We can then either a) make the perpetrator pay down the debt you feel (as you take it out of his hide in vengeance!) in which case evil spreads into us and hardens us b) or you can forgive--but that is enormously difficult. But that is the only way to stop the evil from hardening us as well. 2) If we can't forgive without suffering (because of our sense of justice) its not surprising to learn that God couldn't forgive us without suffering—coming in the person of Christ and dying on the cross. 2) There are two ways

f) The unreliable Bible. It seems impossible any longer to take the Bible as completely authoritative in the light of modern science, history, and culture. Also we can't be sure what in the Bible's accounts of events is legendary and what really happened. Finally, much of the Bible's social teaching (for example, about women) is socially regressive. So how can we trust it scientifically, historically, and socially.

Brief response: The gospels' form precludes their being legends. The Biblical gospels are not legends but historically reliable accounts about Jesus' life. Why? 1) *Their timing is far too early for them to be legends.* The gospels however were written 30-60 years after Jesus' death--and Paul's letters, which support all the accounts, came just 20 years after the events.) 2) *Their content is far too counter-productive to be legends.* The accounts of Jesus crying out that God had abandoned him, or the resurrection where all the witnesses were women—did not help Christianity in the eyes of 1st century readers. The only historically plausible reason that these incidents are recorded is that they happened.) The 'offensiveness' of the Bible is culturally relative. Texts you find difficult and offensive are 'common sense' to people in other cultures. And many of the things you find offensive because of your beliefs and convictions, many of which will seem silly to your grandchildren just as many of your grandparents' beliefs offend you. Therefore, to simply reject any Scripture is to assume your culture (and worse yet your time in history) is superior to all others. It is narrow-minded in the extreme.

Two final notes on dealing with 'doubts' and 'defeaters.'

- It is critical to state these defeaters in the strongest possible way. If a non-Christian hears you express them and says, "that's better than I could have put it" then they will feel that they are being respected and will take your answer more seriously. You will need to have good answers to these defeaters woven in redundantly to everything you say and teach in the church.
- Our purpose with these defeaters or doubts is not to 'answer' them or 'refute' them but to deconstruct them. That is, to "show that they are not as solid or as natural as they first appear" (Kevin Vanhoozer). It is important to show that all doubts and objections to Christianity are really *alternate* beliefs and faith-acts about the world. (If you say, "I just can't believe that there is only one true religion"—that is a faith-act. You can't prove that.) And when you see you're your doubts are really beliefs, and when you require the same amount of evidence for them that you are asking of Christian beliefs, then it becomes evident many of them are very weak and largely adopted because of cultural pressure.

6. Building blocks to faith.

a. Deconstruct your doubts. Your doubts are really beliefs, and you can't avoid betting your life and destiny on *some* kind of belief in God and the universe. Non-commitment' is impossible. Faith-acts are inevitable. (See above.)

b. Realize you already know there's God. You actually already believe in God at the deep level, whatever you tell yourself intellectually. Our outrage against injustice despite how natural it is (in a world based on natural selection) shows that we already do believe in God at the most basic level, but are suppressing that knowledge for our convenience. The Christian view of God means world is not the product of violence or random disorder (as in both the ancient and modern accounts of creation) but was created by a Triune God to be a place of peace and community. So at the root of all reality is not power and individual self-assertion (as in the pagan and post-modern view of things) but love and sacrificial service for the common good.

c. Recognize your biggest problem. You aren't spiritually free. No one is. Everyone is spiritually enthralled to something. 'Sin' is not simply breaking rules but is building your identity on things other than God, which leads internally to emptiness, craving, and spiritual slavery and externally to exclusion, conflict, and social injustice.

d. Discern the difference between religion and the gospel. There is a radical difference between religion—in which we believe our morality secures for us a place of favor in God and in the world—and gospel Christianity—in which our standing with God is strictly a gift of grace. These two different core understandings produce very different communities and character. The former produces both superiority and inferiority complexes, self-righteousness, religiously warranted strife, wars, and violence. The latter creates a mixture of both humility and enormous inner confidence, a respect for 'the Other', and a new freedom to defer our needs for the common good.

e. Understand the Cross. All forgiveness entails suffering and that the only way for God to forgive us and restore justice in the world without destroying us was to come into history and give himself and suffer and die on the Cross in the person of Jesus Christ. Both the results of the Cross (freedom from shame and guilt; awareness of our significance and value) and the pattern of the Cross (power through service, wealth through giving, joy through suffering) radically changes the way we relate to God, ourselves, and the world.

f. Embrace the resurrection. Because there is no historically possible alternative explanation of the rise of the Christian church than the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. And if Jesus was raised from the dead as a forerunner of the renewal of all the material and physical world, then this gives Christians both incentive to work to restore creation (fighting poverty, hunger, and injustice) as well as infinite hope that our labors will not be in vain. And finally, it eliminates the fear of death.