

The Heathen Is Us

Gibson Stroupe

Oakhurst Presbyterian Church, Decatur, Georgia

Ten years ago I wrote an article for the *Journal for Preachers* entitled "The Work of the Spirit in a Technological Age." In it I raised the question of whether or not technology caused the spiritual corruption that is pervasive in late twentieth century life in the West. That article was a description of life in our technological society, and the analysis is still valid. Ten years does make a difference, however. It is a moot point whether technology caused our spiritual poverty. What is seen now in the West is an almost complete victory for materialism and the technology which undergirds it.

I

The purpose of this article is to address a question suggested by Lesslie Newbigin in some of his recent books. Newbigin believes that the most important question for evangelism in the church is not whether one should be a missionary to the Third or Fourth Worlds. Rather, the most important question for evangelism is in being missionaries to Western culture. He puts it bluntly in *Foolishness to the Greeks* as he discusses the problems raised by cross-cultural missions:

The weakness, however, of this whole mass of missiological writing is that while it has sought to explore the problems of contextualization in all the cultures of humankind from China to Peru, it has largely ignored the culture that is the most widespread, powerful, and persuasive among all contemporary cultures—namely, what I have called modern Western culture. Moreover, this neglect is even more serious because it is this culture that, more than almost any other, is proving resistant to the gospel. In great areas of Asia, Africa, and Oceania, the church grows steadily and even spectacularly. But in the areas dominated by modern Western culture (whether in its capitalist or socialist political expression) the church is shrinking and falling on deaf ears. (pp. 2-3)

Newbigin believes that those most in need of the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ are not the heathen "over there," but the heathen "in here," those of us in the West. His analysis is correct, and I want to look at his intriguing suggestion: what does it mean to be a missionary to Western cultures? In this work we may be more like spies in hostile territory than conquerors coming in for victory. Our current situation is similar to that of early Israel's in the Promised Land: two systems sit side by side. Many of our images come from the Judaeo-Christian heritage, and we still use the language of that tradition. The power in the culture, however, rests not in Yahweh or Jesus but in that other religion—the system of the materialist, technological view of life.

Perhaps then, as missionaries we shall join the prophetic tradition and call the people back to the realities of life.

The struggle is similar to that of Israel in the Promised Land: although the belief systems are somewhat compatible, only one can reign as master. The system founded on modern science claims supremacy, and the church simply must not bow down. The tools of science and materialism can and are certainly used by the church, but for believers in Jesus Christ, they must remain as tools and must not be allowed to assume a position of dominance.

Christianity must challenge modernity's claim to supremacy in at least three areas: intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. The triumph of the materialist view is seen most clearly in intellectual endeavors. It is simply no longer debatable whether the realm of the "spirit" has any credibility in the questions of the fundamentals of life. In the world of ideas, it is assumed that the battle is over. Whatever mysteries remain, whatever has been assigned to the "spirit" by those in the past who have lacked the proper tools for analysis—these remnants will be vanquished by the relentless march of the scientific method. The truth of the triumph of the materialist view is seen most clearly, ironically, in the debate on the authority of Scripture. Those who want a "literal Adam and Eve," a "literal Noah's ark," a "literal wall of Jericho" search frantically for archaeological evidence that will be recognized in the courts of truth—a court whose builder and maker is the scientific method. For all of their professed disdain of modern science, the biblical literalists have bought the methodology of science completely. It does not matter whether the primary matter is called "Adam" or "atom"; the victory has been won.

There are some disturbing little hobgoblins, though—ghosts from past philosophical eras which seem resistant to the ghost busting of modern science. Physicists tell us that the reality "out there," a reality measurable and quantifiable, is no longer available to ordinary language and thus must be reduced finally to mathematics. And yet, the very language of physics itself points to a reality that is ultimately beyond even our mathematical grasp, a reality that is even mysterious. In nuclear reactions, scientists readily admit that they cannot track individual electrons—rather, they take an "average." No wonder polls are so powerful in our lives! And what kind of language is the famous "anti-matter"? Isn't such language an admission that there is something "out there" that we cannot capture in our measurements? For several decades the Heisenberg principle has proclaimed this: we cannot know both the speed and the position of an electron at the same time. As far as physics goes, the limitation is inherent, not merely a matter of awaiting better measuring tools.

Quarks, antimatter, photons—who cares? For the vast majority of the West, the power and supremacy of scientific knowledge is evident—in Hiroshima, in nuclear power, and in the possibility of nuclear apocalypse. We must not let this point slip by us, though. The claim of science to have captured the essence of reality is only that—a claim. It simply cannot be verified, and its claims for ultimacy must be seen as a leap of faith, as much as the claims of Christianity. The question raised by Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Kant, Kierkegaard, and others remains: how can we know what's "out there"? One's answer to this question is always a choice, not a given that follows from

adding 1 1. This may seem trivial, but it points to a cornerstone of great importance: in the area of ultimates there are always mysteries, and our answers are *always* choices. In the areas of meaning and purpose, materialist culture cannot define the rules.

As missionaries to Western culture, we must first establish that Christianity is intellectually credible. Its greatest liability is that it rests on a *revelation* of the ultimate reality—the God we see in Jesus Christ. It is a reality grounded in the action of something “out there” and in the choice of the believer. This “liability” cannot be denied, but we must also assert that other belief systems, including the materialist, technological system, are ultimately grounded in the choice of the believer. Such an assertion sounds incredible and reactionary; the victory of our scientific system is so complete that any challenge is seen as anti-intellectual and ludicrous. Most theoretical physicists, however, have simply given up on capturing the essence of ultimate reality. It is the belief system of popular culture which still insists on this claim. Once the fundamentals are examined, the rock solid foundation of modern Western culture is seen to be shaky. This is admittedly a superficial analysis of the intellectual foundations of Western culture, but the brevity of this article prevents further development. For more discussion see books such as Newbiggin’s *Foolishness to the Greeks, And the Trees Shall Clap Their Hands* by Virginia Owens, and *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* by Thomas S. Kuhn.

II

Although the area of ideas, of the intellect, is where the victory of materialism is most clear, it is also the area where the struggle is the easiest to wage. The stickiest problems come when we move to the emotional and spiritual levels of our lives. The prevailing sense that Christianity is not intellectually credible has led us to be reductionistic in our emotional lives. If the ultimate reality is not “out there” beyond us, then the most important unit in our lives has become the atom, and in the life of the self the most important unit has become the individual. All of our techniques and advertising are structured to appeal to individuals. All of our computer letters are typed to look “personal,” to convince us that each of us is important to the entity which is writing us.

There is an emphasis on unlimited freedom and possibilities for individuals, and this produces a crisis in the life of the self. The ideal self is filled with great potential waiting to be tapped and developed. Most of our lives, however, are spent experiencing barriers and limitations to the development of the self. The parts of human life once seen as part of its rhythms are now seen as frustrating and bothersome—family, needs and demands of others, children, aging parents, illness, community and conflicting opinions. No wonder we live in an age of anxiety, of resentment, of hostility, of violence! We are bombarded with the goals of fulfillment of the individual, but our lives reflect a different reality: we aren’t just individualistic atoms!

Nowhere is this crisis of the emotional life revealed more clearly than in the clash between our materialist system and the Christian tradition. In our age the emphasis is that wholeness and meaning (salvation) are to be found

from within the self. This is because the self, like the atom, is seen as the ultimate reality, the final arbiter searching for meaning. Whatever psychological theory one prefers, the emphasis is that salvation comes from within. This is in direct contrast to the Christian understanding of meaning: salvation comes from outside the self, from a personal being that we can know in Jesus Christ. The emphasis in the Christian tradition is not on fulfillment of or wholeness of the self, but rather the transformation of a lonely unit of existence into a functioning part of a larger community that is grounded in Jesus Christ. This transformation comes from outside the self; the individual remains important, but the individual is not ultimate. The atom, the Adam, the Eve are not lost and lonely but are part of a larger system of meaning that is ultimate and eternal.

This crisis in our emotional life has bred a profound crisis of the spirit in Western culture. We simply are unable to support the emotional weight that our culture places upon us as individuals, and we have become spiritually corrupt. Our current answer to this dilemma is exceedingly dangerous: our answer is in affluence and comfort. The recalcitrance of those of us who are comfortable is well known and well documented. Few have pointed to the spiritual crisis that undergirds it, however. It is not just greed that feeds the longing for affluence. It is also the fact that we are fed spiritually, albeit a diet of junk food! In our anxiety over not being able to bear the weight of the individual self, we take comfort by making ourselves comfortable. A great source, if not the greatest source, of power of our technological system is its capacity to produce comfort and affluence. No one wants to recommend that we return to a previous era with few conveniences, but can it be denied that we are in a vicious spiral where economics, where affluence and comfort, are seen as the answers to our spiritual dilemmas? If there is no meaning "out there," if there is no ultimate reality beyond ourselves, why not fall back on affluence and comfort? Why not see them as a way to spend our days which would otherwise be filled with dread? Thus, we guard the affluence produced by our technological system with our very lives. We are loaded with nuclear weapons as the way of saying, "We'd rather die, and we'd rather everyone and everything die—but don't make us give up our affluence; don't make us confess that we do not have the answers." We have been told that each of us is the ultimate reality. We know in our hearts that this is not true, but we gain some sense of meaning and purpose by holding on to affluence as life interpreter. We cling to it as a life line; in our current confusion, *it is*.

We are an age waiting for a messiah. Many of us thought that Ronald Reagan was that messiah—get the Congress off our backs, turn loose the economy, stifle the communists, and we'll all be comfortable and fulfilled. That fulfillment did not happen; it cannot happen as long as our faith is placed in our technological system. Rather than reassessing our beliefs and confronting our idolatry, I am afraid that we will prefer to look for a new messiah—where are you, Pat Robertson?

III

Those of us in the church suffer from this same struggle between a dominant technological system and our Christian belief system, and, like the struggle of ancient Israel in Canaan, it is profound. We often seek to prove that the Christian faith is real and true by taking divergent paths. Those called "liberals" often seek to prove the truth of the faith by dedicating themselves to social action in the name of Jesus. In this urgency to prove the faith, the search for justice often becomes the content of the faith, leaving behind the necessity of the spiritual journey of the individual. There are many good reasons for the voluminous social pronouncements of each General Assembly meeting (or similar national meetings of other denominations), but often they do not speak to the spiritual struggles involved. This wing of the church, then, seeks to prove that God is real by making calls to justice. Such calls are necessary and commendable, but, left by themselves, they fall into the trap of accepting the materialist criteria for verifying the truth. It must be measured in materialistic terms: the more justice proclaimed and achieved, the more likely the truth of the Christian story.

Those called "conservatives" in the church take a different approach. Rather than going out into the technological world and seeking to answer it on its own terms, these folk seek to separate the kingdoms. The truth of the spirit is to be found by fencing off the church from the complexities of the world. The truth of the spirit is to be found in life together in the church and its liturgy. What happens in the world is too confusing and overwhelming for the faith, and believers must be protected from the influence of the heathen out there. There is a strong desire for inner control to prevent pollution of the believers. This approach seeks to meet the need for addressing the spiritual struggles of the individual. Perhaps better than the "liberals'" way, this approach understands the longing of the individual for communion with the ultimate reality that we see in Jesus Christ.

This approach fails, though, on at least two counts. In the first place, like the other wing, the "conservatives" accept the terms of the competing religion of technology, although for this wing, the acceptance is the idea that the ultimate reality is the individual. By refusing to come into the world, there is an admission that the truth of Jesus Christ is too weak to stand up to the onslaughts of the complexities of modern life. An additional failure of this approach is that it simply refuses to see that the two kingdoms cannot be separated so neatly. There is a blindness to the pervasiveness of modern culture into the "conservative" church. Would the Southern Baptists—to use an example of those receiving the most publicity for their fencing off efforts—would they entertain a motion to divest their reserve funds from all interest bearing accounts in order to comply with the Old Testament laws on usury? Would they return all their land holdings to the original owners in the year of Jubilee? Neither stream in the church seems to be leading us in a faithful direction. On all three levels—intellectual, emotional, spiritual—there is a great lack in the culture and in the church.

IV

Well now, *finally* to the question of being missionaries in such a situation. Is it possible? Yes, it is, and here are several suggested ways to begin. First, the church of Jesus Christ must not flinch at the truth which it holds. In all areas of life, the truth, the ultimate reality, is the God we know in Jesus Christ. That truth must be held and affirmed in all dialogues—with science, with technology, with other cultures, with other religions, with one another. For several centuries we Christians have allowed ourselves to be pushed into a corner of ideas called “nonverifiable,” and that pace has accelerated tremendously in this century. We must respond now and perhaps even be offensive by saying that those who wear the blinders are not we, but are rather the ones (including ourselves) that place faith in other gods such as technology and affluence. We must assure ourselves of the truth that has been given to us, and then we must affirm that Jesus Christ is Lord in the world, without stammering an apology at the same time.

Second, we must build on this foundation to engage the world. We can be bold to proclaim the truth to a culture that ridicules it on the one hand but longs for it on the other. We must acknowledge the longing of the individual spirit for communion with God; this is not a remnant of primitive humanity but rather a profound part of the human condition. We will find a culture whose center is splintering, a culture that seeks to fill that vacuum with materials such as comfort and affluence. The problem is not the lack of power of the truth of Jesus Christ; the problem is our lack of confidence in it. We will find that the truth we have been given can stand the test of engaging the world.

Third, we, too, in the church must renounce our allegiance to the idols of the culture. We must proclaim to ourselves and for ourselves that Jesus Christ is Lord. Our proclamation cannot be like the practice which plagued ancient Israel—proclaiming with our lips while grasping onto the idols with our hands. We also must refrain from the practice of finding meaning and purpose in affluence and comfort. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not about a journey to become comfortable through powerful technological tools. The gospel of Jesus Christ is about being witnesses to, even missionaries for, the truth that we are saved and redeemed through the grace of God. Church members must be enabled to wrestle with this difficult issue with integrity, and we pastors must concern ourselves not so much with salary packages and tax brackets, but rather with serving the one we proclaim as Lord.

Finally, our proclamation to the world must be one couched in celebration of the Good News we have been given in Jesus Christ. We must be firm in our resolve—the struggle will be fierce—but we must also be loving. Part of the resentment and self-righteousness that seems so prevalent in the church comes from our lack of confidence in our source. Can God actually survive if Christianity is not equated with the United States? Can God actually survive if Christianity is not equated with social justice? The answer to these, disturbing as it may seem, is “yes.” The truth we have been given through Jesus Christ is the ultimate reality, pervading all the penultimate realities, beyond them all, too. Once we have grasped that truth, we can begin to relax a bit and open ourselves in love and celebration of the gift we have been given.

If we are able to begin to appropriate some of these elements—confidence in the truth of Jesus Christ, engagement of the world, turning loose of our own idolatries, celebrating and welcoming others in the name of Jesus Christ—we shall indeed be empowered missionaries for the gospel. There are signs of hope among us: a longing for spiritual truths, communities of faith springing up to worship and serve Jesus Christ first and foremost, dedicated servants answering the call to discipleship. The difficult temptations remain which are the same that destroyed ancient Israel: a refusal to admit our idolatries, the assuaging materials of affluence and comfort, the lack of trust in the truth we've been given. The unprecedented butchery of the 20th century, the hardheartedness of the affluent, the terror of nuclear weapons—all of these seek to mock us and seek to make us give up.

We are called, however, to live and yea, even to celebrate, the good news we have seen in Jesus Christ. In the midst of all the harshness, all the ambiguities, all the temptations, let us remember that the trees do clap their hands. The reality of the God we know in Jesus Christ is not just a belief of primitives; it is the truth that permeates atoms, electrons, antimatter, mathematical equations, liberals, conservatives, capitalists, socialists, communists, and all the other images we have. Let us cling to, let us serve, the truth so eloquently stated in the *Declaration of Faith*: Jesus Christ is Lord. He has been Lord from the beginning. He will be Lord at the end. Even now he is Lord.