

Preaching as Missionary Encounter with North American Paganism

(In homage to Lesslie Newbigin, 1909 - 1998)

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About that time no little disturbance broke out concerning the Way. A man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business with the artisans. These he gathered together, with the workers of the same trade, and said, "Men, you know that we get our wealth from this business. You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her." (Acts 19:23-27)

This passage from Acts is a revealing vignette of interpretive dissonance, of communicative conflict. At first glance, we have a clash between gospel and business. Yet as the argument moves along, we find that the problem is Paul's countercultural assertion that "gods made with hands are not gods." Earlier in Acts, Paul in Athens dismissed the center of Western culture as just another gentile "city full of idols" (Acts 17:16). The first gentile convert, Cornelius, groveling about on his knees before Peter, had to be instructed before baptism, "Stand up, I am only a mortal" (Acts 10:26). These gentiles will worship anything if given half a chance to worship something.

Artemis was no mean deity. Her temple was one of the seven wonders of the world, the ideological foundation of the Roman banking system, somewhat like the World Bank. Artemis was the embodiment of prosperity and a fully functioning economy. With her multiple breasts, she held in her protective embrace bankers and debtors. Ordinary people loved Artemis for her wild nature. She epitomized a love of and respect for the natural world. Although she was goddess of the hunt, she also was a protector of young animals. Considered to be the mother goddess, she was the closest thing the Greeks had to the Asian Magna Mater. Her numerous love affairs with gods and mortals endeared her to many, though Homer stresses her chastity. She had a bad temper, perhaps because of her association with all that is wild, and unfettered, and natural. In short, she was a perfect multi-breasted, many-faceted embodiment of our World Bank, The Humane Society, Planned Parenthood, the La Leche League, and a number of other worthy causes. Why Artemis was not invoked and venerated in the recent "Reimagining" Conferences, I cannot say. She is certainly the mythic embodiment of just about everything we consider to be of ultimate importance.

The objections to Paul's preaching raised by the silversmith Demetrius are first economic ("We get our wealth from this business") but quickly become theological ("This Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying

that gods made with hands are not gods”). Finally, he accuses Paul of provoking disrespect and infringing on the religious tourist trade. With pagans, there is invariably an inextricable mix of the economic and the spiritual, always a close connection between idolatry and vested business interests. Great bodied, earth-mother Artemis was a perfect god for a decaying, yet economically prosperous late classical culture. People on top tend toward praise.¹ Her worship was mostly praise and petition, for she demanded little and offered much to her devotees.

I shall avoid the temptation to ponder all the ways that the veneration of Artemis thrives even today and move to a consideration of the ways in which this missionary episode from Acts, though suspiciously omitted from our Common Lectionary, is a helpful pattern for thinking about the theological challenges of preaching today.

Christian communication tends to provoke conflict.

Before preaching is communication it is witness, testimony to something which has happened among us. When “communication” becomes our primary aim, we become overly troubled about persuasion, agreement, making connections with our listeners, and all the other goals which, if not kept in their place, can compromise Christian preaching. The agenda of Acts is clear: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Christian witnesses work within a given culture—who doesn’t? The current theological fad of “public theology,” which implies that there is something called “private theology,” is a specious and pretentious distinction.² Whenever theology is done in a language like English, it is “public,” that is, it adheres to a given set of linguistic rules, practices, and traditions which are “public.” Unfortunately, much so-called “public theology” means theology which bows to what the dominant culture says can be uttered in order to gain a hearing.

Christian communication, in the mode of Acts 19, is witness, that manner of speech in public, in the words of a given culture which rarely respects that culture or leaves its gods undisturbed. Witness does not attempt to “speak to the world”; instead, witness testifies that the world belongs to God. That witness is bound to provoke conflict, not because it is difficult to understand, but rather because the content of its witness is a challenge to the world. Behind seemingly innocuous terms like “business,” or “politics,” or “human values,” Christians suspect the principalities and powers to be at work. Knowing the human mind to be “a perpetual factory of idols” (Calvin), we are not surprised when seemingly innocent, allegedly “secular” activities are revealed to be based upon certain idolatrous assumptions.

In *Foolishness to the Greeks*, Lesslie Newbigin set the tone for a missionary analysis of North American culture. We can do no better than his definition of “gospel”:

In speaking of “the gospel” I am, of course, referring to the announcement that in the series of events that have their center in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ something has happened that alters the total human situation and must therefore call in to question every human culture.³

I like Newbigin’s stress upon the gospel as something which has happened to us,

a “series of events” which are the story of Jesus. The gospel is not some primitive means of finding meaning in life or attempting to talk about the world in a mythic way. The gospel is witness, testimony to something which has happened to us and the world, testimony that something is afoot called the outbreak of the Kingdom of God.

Even more, I like Newbigin’s stress that here is an event which has altered the world, a “fact” as Barth might put it, which “must therefore call in to question every human culture.” The advent of the Kingdom of God is a threat to the sovereignty of every other “kingdom.” This is the dynamic which we see in Acts 19. The gospel is prone to conflict with every culture in which it makes its way, “including the one in which it was originally embodied” says Newbigin.⁴ Christian communicators communicate the gospel in the language of the receptor culture, accepting at least provisionally the way that culture describes the world, yet if it is truly gospel communication, “it will call radically into question that way of understanding embodied in the language it uses.”⁵

Does this missionary understanding of Christian communication challenge the way you were taught to preach? I was educated theologically into the assumption that we preachers speak in the language of our culture, but I was not prepared for the necessary, inevitable communicative conflict which the gospel provokes with this culture or any other. This seems strange to admit, considering how time and again scripture stresses interpretive friction, cognitive dissonance, and rhetorical abrasiveness such as we see among the devotees of Artemis in Acts 19. I ought never to forget that the result of most New Testament preaching was a cross rather than recognition as “One of the twelve most effective preachers in the English speaking world.”

We were led to believe, in my seminary training, that there was some way to preach which would avoid interpretive dissonance through skillful translation of Christian categories into the language of the age. If Paul had been schooled by Tillich, he could have explained to the folk at Ephesus, at least those with a college degree, that Jesus Christ is simply another helpful means of describing their spiritual hunger which they tend to call Artemis but we find helpful to call Ultimate Reality. No. Paul at least preached in such a way (“gods made with hands are not gods”) that even the Ephesians could see that the intellectual foundation for their world was being assaulted.

Rather than attempting to subsume the worship of Artemis into some allegedly all embracing and less threatening category like “pluralism” — saying that, though Artemis worship has much to commend it, we are all basically trying to praise the same God who some call Artemis and others call Jesus—Paul clearly demarcates the difference between two competing deities. Paul is amazingly willing to have his witness rejected.⁶

The way I read Acts, most of the church’s theological mistakes are in the interest of evangelism. In reaching out to speak to the world in the name of mission, sometimes we fall in. So desperate are we for a hearing, we take up the grammar and syntax of the world to the degree that we sound like the world. The world thus fails to hear the offense of the gospel, fails to enjoy the dignity of disbelief, and is led to believe that the difference between church and world is only one of semantics rather than an issue of idolatry.

Some recent North American theology hopes to find some neutral, all-embracing higher ground where we can stand above the conflict inherent in the worship of different deities. Usually the common ground is only some other deity (“pluralism,”

“inclusiveness”) which fails to do justice to the religions which it claims to be adjudicating. I suspect that the search for some neutral, non-conflicted way of talking about different religions is due to the lingering sense among some theologians that they have a responsibility to keep American culture working smoothly. In our present political order, religious conflict is judged to be particularly nefarious, so theologians labor to make the intellectual differences between various religions appear to be only superficial dissimilarities which can be erased by reference to some larger, more all embracing category like “God.” Theological subservience to the dominant political order is a hard habit to break, particularly in university departments of religion.

Paul had the potentially unpleasant task of telling the Ephesians that the name of God was Trinity, not Artemis.

The conflict evoked by Christian preaching is often economic, political in character.

One almost admires the way Demetrius cuts to the heart of the matter and admits to the economic basis of his quarrel with Paul. “Men, you know that we get our wealth from this business.” Contemporary pagan resistance to the gospel is likely to be more sly, reluctant to admit the linkages between its economic attachments and its faith.

For instance, note that Paul does not come preaching an abstraction like “love” or “pluralism” or “diversity.” Modernity has a long record of attempting to find some all embracing absolute which rises above the contingencies of history, some standpoint above all particular standpoints in an attempt to universalize its truth claims. The result is detachment of the “spiritual” from anything of any real earthly significance, absorption of Christianity into the monistic spirituality of Asia at best, a vague, desiccated intellectualization of Christianity at worst.⁷

Paul, in witnessing to a God who is *in* history rather than above it, provokes immediate confrontation with the economics of paganism. Christianity survived, even defeated late Classical culture in great part because it kept close to the ground. Let those who celebrate the current upsurge of “spirituality” take note.

One of my students did a study of selected sermons of some contemporary preachers and noted throughout their sermons a curious lack of any expectation of transformation. The sermons aimed at skillful redescription of our situation, eloquent portrayal of our circumstances, adjustment, adaptation, but rarely conversion, change, or detoxification. I suspect that the basis of this not-too-pushy preaching is economic rather than theological, if that is a fair distinction to make. The affluent, the well fixed like Demetrius tend to idolize the status quo. We have a good thing going. Why preach change? The economy is doing quite nicely. Who cares what the President does in his bedroom or the Oval Office? That’s personal. Sex becomes our peculiar problem because there is such a nice fit between our sexual expression and the demands of a consumerist economy. We are reluctant to criticize the President’s sexual activity for the same reason that we don’t have much negative to say about the “free market.”

Prophetic preaching is hard to come by in a world where there is no alternative world (for us, *church*) to be laid alongside our received world. Lacking a clear political rival, the state is left unchallenged in its pretensions to provide the sole authoritative plausibility structure. Paul provokes conflict, not because he offers another helpful way for us to be happy, but rather because he dares to assert that one world is false, without basis, delusional (“gods made with hands are not gods”) and that the real world is now present in Jesus. Demetrius is perceptive in his realization that Paul’s preaching

is an assault upon “all Asia,” even “the world.”

Christian preaching aims, not at the cessation of all interpretive strife, epistemological peace, but rather at the creation of a new counter *polis* (i.e. *church*). And, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, if we preachers won’t let God use us to create a new world, then all we can do is to service the old one. And that’s no fun.

Idolatry, paganism, is more a challenge for Christian preaching than alleged secularity.

Lesslie Newbigin, to whom we preachers owe a reading of ours as a time of missionary confrontation with the culture, began better to understand his situation in 1960’s England when he began reading England as he once read India. What he had been told to read as a “secular” society, he now recognized as pagan. He realized that he was not speaking the gospel into a secular religious vacuum in which a primitive way of construing the world called “religious” was being rejected by a new non-religious way called “secular.” Rather, Newbigin discovered what he said he should have known by reading the Gospels (or at least by texts like Acts 19). “No room remains empty for long. If God is driven out, the gods come trooping in.”⁸ Artemis redivivis.

The West is more properly thought of as pagan than as secular, for those determined to give a theological reading of our situation. Newbigin discovered it to be a paganism more resilient and resistant than that previously encountered by Christian missionaries in great part because it is paganism which is reluctant to acknowledge its commitments as essentially fiduciary. Having relegated Christianity, along with other traditional religions, to that sphere of life which it calls “religious,” Western culture then claims a sphere called “secular,” or “the natural world,” or “the economy” which operates on principles which are allegedly immune from “supernatural” causality. This is one of the ways that secularity protects its claims from critique by theology. At least the silversmiths of Ephesus acknowledged the linkage between their veneration of Artemis and their economy. The devotees of secularism have been reluctant to acknowledge the relationship between their alleged godlessness and the requirements of capitalist consumption.

Despite its best intentions, modernity did not succeed in killing the gods, but rather in fostering rampant superstition. Modern people like to think that as we become more educated, liberal, enlightened, the less we need to worship God. No. We appear to have been created to worship, and worship we will. Thus we superstitiously depict our lives as in the grip of the Fates. Luck becomes our secular American theology, substitute for Providence. Life becomes one great casino (there is some sort of link between the recent rise of legalized gambling like Georgia’s lottery and modern superstitiousness). “When your number’s up, it’s up,” we say. Rabbi Kushner’s popular *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* says that God is mostly uninvolved in the good or bad that happens to us. Life is a big roulette wheel and what can anybody do? Prometheus, Eros, Mars, Psyche, the list of deities appears to be exploding, as human activity is inflated to the level of the divine. Toward the end of this century, having bankrupted the Russians, we exchanged worship of the Almighty Bomb for veneration of our genitals (a cult with a long and noble tradition). Affluent, Western people, having solved so many of life’s problems like food, housing, and clothing, now beseech the gods, not for bread but for mutual orgasm.

In a forthcoming book on the Ten Commandments,⁹ Stanley Hauerwas and I wonder if modern superstition is due not only to our breaking of the First Commandment but to a misunderstanding of its prohibition against images. God is transcendent, apart, distant, yes. But God is also Trinity, which means that God is incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, making possible our ability to see God.

Thus, the church defended the veneration of icons, not only of Christ but also of Mary, the Mother of God, of angels and saints, because we know God incarnate. Seeing God's self-giving in Jesus, sacramentally encountered at the Lord's Table and in baptism, we are given the means to resist temptations to idolatry.

Our God is not ineffable. Therefore we must preach and plead against the arrogant unwillingness to worship God who comes to us in the form of a Jew.

For instance, Harvard's Diana Eck complains that the God of Israel and the church is far too "exclusive" to be helpful in ameliorating contemporary religious differences, which she considers to be at the heart of most contemporary political conflict. That any one could blame contemporary international conflict upon God, rather than upon the murderous nation states, is surprising. Who is the "god" Eck would have us worship? She says, "God is our way of speaking of a Reality that cannot be encompassed by any one religious tradition, including our own."¹⁰ Our experiences of the divine make God, rather than God producing our experiences. So Eck begins by worshiping tolerance, or pluralism, or some other limp secular virtue as a way to deal with a violent world, then attempts to salvage those aspects from the Jewish and Christians scriptures which conform to her predetermination of what the world needs before it knows God. She performs much the same operation on Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, finding among these faiths much that is useful to enable us to live together. The historical, particular (i.e., Jewish) character of the Christian faith is jettisoned in the interest of an allegedly more all embracing faith.

Why must the God of Israel and the church be so exclusive? Why get so worked up over a bit of idolatry among friends? What's the harm of a little worship of Artemis on the side, as long as it makes us feel better and if it helps to unite a diverse culture?

The God who comes to us in Jesus is a person who tends to take things, including us, personally. Yahweh is a jealous God, zealously guarding his prerogatives in his creation. There is for us no such thing as "grace," only a gracious God who has a face, a name, and a family.

Salvation, we must witness, really does come through the Jews. The way God has deemed to save the world from itself is through Israel and church. Any attempt to sidestep this particularity of election as the basis for universal salvation is to be rejected as arrogant effort to evade the delightful scandal that God comes to the world, of all places, in Nazareth, in of all forms, a Jew, gather up into the divine promise, of all people, us gentiles.¹¹ All attempts to achieve universality through a medium (the World Bank, the UN, "the free market") other than the existence of a witnessing people called church are to be rejected as arrogant efforts to evade the scandal that God invades the world by means of something so fragile as preaching, by people so fallible as Paul. God chooses to reconstitute the human family, to recreate the human race, overcoming the world's ways of gathering people (money, gender, race) through water and the Word.

It is not that we will be punished for our idolatry. Paul never threatens punishment to the Ephesians. Rather our idolatry itself is punishment in that it is painful not to be

who we were created to be. We were created to worship the true and living God whom we have met in Jesus the Christ. Life is better without false consolations. Our hearts are restless until they find rest in the God whom we were created to worship. Demetrius was right in his charge that Christians want to deprive Artemis of her majesty.

Besides, as Paul implies, false gods can be so demanding. When our gods are the work of our hands, mere projections of our insatiable need, relentless attempts at self-salvation, we must stay busy. For the pagan, there is no Sabbath because the world is the work of our hands. Our Jewish and Christian point of view is that, liturgically speaking, monogamy tends to take less work, and far less rationalization than adultery. We rest in the realization that the true God created us for worship, not work. Life within a “permanent factory of idols” is grim. And, as Bob Dylan says, everybody tends to serve somebody.

Some time ago, Millard Fuller spoke on our campus, telling about how he and his wife prayerfully decided to sell everything they had and move from a successful law practice to a poor neighborhood in Americus, Georgia, and wait for God to tell them what to do next. Eventually, God told them to start building houses for poor people, and Habitat for Humanity was born.

Later that week, one of us was asked, “How old were Fuller’s children when he and his wife pulled up and moved to Americus?”

We were slow to get the point of the question until it was asked more than once. Behind the question was the modern sentimentality: It’s fine for you to have some religious experience if you want, but it’s not fine for you to drag your children into it with you, to ask them to sacrifice for your values.

The person asking the question has a daughter on birth control pills at sixteen and a son who has been hospitalized for alcohol abuse.

We are all sacrificing our children to some god or another, asking our children to suffer for what we believe in, be it big breasted Artemis or Toyota, Disney, or Amway. The issue is not *if* we will worship but *whom*. It is our delight in our preaching to testify to the gracious work of a God whose worship is nothing less than life, and that abundantly.

Notes

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Israel’s Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988) helped me better to appreciate the connection between doxology and idolatry, particularly among the powerful.

² While one can understand the frustration of Christians at our relegation to the sphere of the “private” by American culture, prohibited from activity in the “public” sphere where anything important like politics and economics take place, “public theology,” which makes too many accommodations to the dominant culture is not the way to go. Liberal culture’s relegation of religion (note the curious connection between the words “religion” and “relegate”) to the realm of the “private” is a distinction which Christians ought to attack by questioning liberalism’s foundational conviction that there is something called “private” and something called “public,” not by capitulating to that conviction by accepting liberalism’s terms for “public” argument. See Stanley Hauerwas’ attack on George Will’s statement that, in the United States, “religion is to be perfectly free as long as it is perfectly private....private and subordinate,” in Hauerwas’ *After Christendom?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), pp. 23-44.

³ *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), pp. 3-4.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 6.

⁶ I have never been able to see, as have some, how Luke-Acts could be construed as “triumphalistic.” By my reckoning, for every homiletical success in Acts, there is a miserable homiletical failure, if by success we mean agreement with and positive response to the sermon. Luke has a theology of the cross. It is to be found in all the ways that testimony leads to crisis, rejection, and persecution for Christian preachers in Acts.

⁷ In responding to John Hick’s *The Myth of God Incarnate*, Lesslie Newbigin put the matter succinctly:

“Either one can take the general religious experience of mankind as the clue for our understanding of the human situation, and then seek categories with which to fit Jesus into this understanding, or one can take Jesus as the absolutely crucial and determinative clue for all understanding and then try to understand the rest of human experience from this centre. This, of course, is the issue which Karl Barth pressed relentlessly in all his writing.” *Context and Conversion* (London: Church Missionary Society, 1978), p. 5.

⁸ Quoted by George R. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin’s Theology of Cultural Plurality* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), p. 79. Hunsberger has given us our most astute reading of Newbigin and his work, particularly the way that Newbigin’s missionary encounter with Western culture was dependent upon his theological commitments to a robust doctrine of election.

⁹ Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments and the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, forthcoming in the fall of 1999).

¹⁰ Eck, *Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), p. 169.

¹¹ George R. Hunsberger does a wonderful job of showing how Newbigin’s universal missionary theology was based upon his conviction that, “The Bible seems to teach consistently that God’s gift of salvation (which is certainly intended for all) works by the principle of election, one being chosen to be the means of God’s saving grace to others.” *Bearing the Witness*, p. 46. If we are going to be saved, it will be through indebtedness to our sisters and brothers in Israel and the church, not by holding certain broad ideas about pluralism. Universalism and election are not in opposition to one another (Eck) but rather complementary to one another.