

Preaching in a Pluralistic World

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At multiple points, the text of the book of Acts highlights the conviction of the early apostles and lifts up the confidence of their preaching. In one instance, they prayed for boldness, and it is recorded that the place where they were gathered started shaking as they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to preach God's word with the boldness for which they had prayed (Acts 4:29–31). When preaching today, however, in contexts shaped by religious diversity or the kind of social and ideological divisions that permeate contemporary culture, we may be tempted to shrink from bold proclamation and to exercise reserve and caution in the things we say, qualifying every claim so as not to offend or cause division. Preachers know this quandary well: we have something to say, but we're not interested in dividing our congregations or alienating those we are trying to reach with polarizing rhetoric. Paul tells the Romans, "I am not ashamed of the gospel." But what exactly does being unashamed of the gospel look like for those who value diversity and embrace a healthy pluralism of ideas, beliefs, and religious views in our world—and in the church? If we seek a world where all persons can exercise their faith traditions freely and with respect, shouldn't we temper our evangelistic overtures and restrain the assertiveness of our preaching?

Admittedly, not all Christians are tempted by restraint in pluralistic contexts; instead the temptation runs in the opposite direction. Centuries of Christendom have taught us to think we are supposed to win, that what it means to evangelize in a pluralistic context is to defeat religious rivals, whether through apologetic arguments designed to prove the truth of the gospel and defend it against objections or by legislating the superiority of Christianity politically and culturally. Especially in a pluralistic context, the Christian desire to triumph is powerful. We are not ashamed!

Yet Paul's words need not be taken as a provocation to "in-your-face" evangelism or a justification for the kind of loud, wordy, and monological approach that treats the gospel as a brick to be thrown at people, who are then judged unforgivingly if they fail to catch it. It is quite possible to be assured and confident in our witness without taking a triumphalist and competitive approach to communicating the gospel in contexts of diversity and pluralism. But there are obstacles to achieving this balance.

One of the common denominators in contemporary approaches to preaching in the context of pluralism is a presumption that most religions are functionally similar or oriented toward the same object or end (salvation, or some "ultimate concern"), even if we might judge them differently as to their adequacy in attaining that end. Even the fact that we can use the singular word *religion* to describe phenomena as diverse as Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Native American spiritualities reveals (or perhaps conceals) a prior confidence that they are all pretty much doing the same kinds of things and can each be taken as individual species of the same genus. How we proceed on the basis of this assumption, of course, varies greatly. On one end of the spectrum, Christian "exclusivists" consider other religions as their rivals and are thus led to profess the absolute truth of Christianity as excluding the truth of those

other religions. Adherents of other religions must be evangelized and converted. On the other end of the spectrum, so-called Christian “pluralists” likewise interpret other religions as functionally similar. But in this case, other religions are not perceived as rivals, nor do their adherents need to be evangelized and converted. Rather, we are all traveling up the same mountain, albeit along different paths.

The pluralist position is often taken to be the more generous and tolerant of the two (especially by pluralists!). But by examining pluralism through a postcolonial lens, we can see how it refuses to allow the other to be other and instead presupposes sameness and uniformity in the way it constructs the various religious traditions and their relationships to one another. This it does, as Kathryn Tanner has argued, by pretending to speak from a neutral vantage point that comprehends a totality, thereby perpetuating a colonialist outlook in ways that diminish differences in favor of transcendent unities or abstracted commonalities.¹ As Tanner puts it, “Commonalities, which should be established in and through a process of dialogue, are constructed ahead of time by pluralists to serve as presuppositions for dialogue; pluralists thereby close themselves to what people of other religions might have to say about their account of these commonalities.”² This focus on similarities and commonalities not only diminishes the extent and importance of the differences among the religions; it disguises the particular starting point, social locations, and perspectives of the pluralists themselves.

Lesslie Newbigin made a similar observation with respect to the famous story of the elephant and the blind men. In the story, the king summons a group of blind men to his palace where they are then asked to touch an elephant and describe what they have encountered. Each man can only feel one portion of the elephant (the trunk, the tusks, the tail, the side, the legs) and so, based on their limited experience, they each describe their encounter with radically different descriptions, and come away thinking they have encountered very different objects. As Newbigin observes,

The real point of the story is constantly overlooked. The story is told from the point of view of the king and his courtiers, who are not blind but can see that the blind men are unable to grasp the full reality of the elephant and are only able to get hold of part of it. The story is constantly told in order to neutralize the affirmations of the great religions, to suggest that they learn humility and recognize that none of them can have more than one aspect of the truth. But, of course, the real point of the story is exactly the opposite. If the king were also blind, there would be no story. The story is told by the king, and it is the immensely arrogant claim of one who sees the full truth, which all the world’s religions are only groping after. It embodies the claim to know the full reality which relativizes all the claims of the religions.³

While pluralism of this sort is quite different from the exclusivism I previously mentioned, the two approaches to religious diversity (and others that lie on a continuum between the two) presuppose a shared starting point that understands and compares the religions through generalizations about what they hold in common. For the exclusivists, Christianity is the only true way to salvation, and, for the pluralists, the various quests for salvation are complementary. But both accept that religions are

functionally doing the same kinds of things. Preaching in the context of pluralism is then shaped and defined by this widespread and overarching set of assumptions. At one extreme, the presence of other religions contradicts the singular and exclusive truth of Christianity (precisely because the other religions are doing the same kinds of things as Christianity), and so preaching takes on an evangelistic cast, pursued as a competitive practice focused on defending the truth of Christianity, defeating its rivals, and pressing for conversion. At the other extreme, the preacher affirms the interchangeability and equivalence of the religions and substitutes dialogue for evangelism, which is necessarily ruled out from the start.

Karl Barth, in his famous commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, set the relationship of the Christian gospel to other religions and philosophies within a very different framework than the competitive one engendered by standard approaches to religious diversity, whether from the right or the left. For Barth, “anxiety concerning the victory of the Gospel—that is, Christian Apologetics—is meaningless, because the Gospel is the victory by which the world is overcome.”⁴ As Barth says,

The Gospel neither requires [persons] to engage in the conflict of religions or the conflict of philosophies, nor does it to compel them to hold themselves aloof from these controversies. In announcing the limitation of the known world by another that is unknown, the Gospel does not enter into competition with the many attempts to disclose within the known world some more or less unknown and higher form of existence and to make it accessible to [people]. The Gospel is not a truth among other truths. Rather, it sets a question-mark against all truths. The Gospel is not the door but the hinge. The [person] who apprehends its meaning is removed from all strife, because [he or she] is engaged in a strife with the whole, even with existence itself.⁵

It follows, for Barth, that Christian apologetics is not only unnecessary; it is meaningless. If the gospel is not a truth among truths, then it does not need to be defended against other competing truths over against which it is set as a rival. Indeed it *cannot* be so defended. Nor does the gospel need evangelists who attempt to “make a case” for Christianity or to insure its triumph from within a closed world of competing options. On the contrary, the gospel is itself a question mark addressed to the whole of our existence and “against all truths.” As Barth says, the gospel “does not require representatives with a sense of responsibility, for it is as responsible for those who proclaim it as it is for those to whom it is proclaimed. It is the advocate of both.”⁵

From the foregoing, it is clear that Barth’s approach stands decidedly against the exclusivist position that views non-Christian religions as rivals to be defeated and their adherents as in need of conversion. But Barth’s understanding is not quite the pluralist one either. As with the pluralist, Barth views all the religions, including Christianity, as essentially doing the same thing: seeking to disclose within the known world, and on its terms, a relatively “unknown and higher form of existence” and to make it accessible to the world. He thereby distinguishes religion, which is human activity, grasping, and striving, from the authentic proclamation of the true God whom we would not know, and could not know, were it not for God’s gracious

revelation in Jesus Christ. Even Christianity itself, as a religious system, falls under this judgment.⁶

The task of the Christian preacher is not to offer some sort of stairway to heaven or to fan into flame a residue spark of the divine that is held to reside within each of us, but to announce the utter impossibility of salvation as an achievement or a reward. In this way, while Barth may agree with pluralists that the various religions are all different paths up the same mountain, he would retort that the proclamation of the gospel requires a resounding “no” to all such mountain climbing. Despite Barth’s indiscriminate lumping together of disparate human phenomena under the single heading of religion (much as we all do), he grasps that in a pluralistic context, what authentic Christian preaching offers the world is not a word that is merely different from other words, but a question mark posed to all such words.

In several respects, Barth’s approach is echoed by Rowan Williams in his insightful book *Christ on Trial*, where he explores the various accounts of Christ’s trial in each of the four gospels. What all four gospel accounts reveal—and especially Mark’s gospel, which stresses Jesus’ silence before both the Sanhedrin and Pilate—is the way Jesus stands outside the structures and languages of power by which he is being judged, and how little leverage he has in that world. As Williams puts it,

Jesus knows more than he can say; he is like a naturally gifted musician trying to explain to slow or even tone-deaf listeners how basic harmony works. And when the transforming power of his presence breaks through in healing, he hurries to forbid people to talk about it. It is as if he knows they will only find the wrong words, the wrong categories.⁷

For Williams, Jesus knows that whatever he says or does will be interpreted from within the world’s narrow range of possibilities so that it becomes just one more bid for power or one more consumer choice in a vast marketplace of options. “Jesus, described in the words of this world, would be a competitor for space in it, part of its untruth.”⁸

If Williams is right, the sobering truth for preachers is that bearing faithful witness to Christ in a pluralistic context may mean that more often than not we are left with the unenviable challenge of how to communicate Christ’s silence. To be sure, the preacher has something to say. To agree with Williams that Jesus is not “a competitor for space” in the world is not to deny that Jesus poses problems for our existence, threatening customary ways of mapping kinships and social relations, inverting established hierarchies, and reversing longstanding patterns of demarcating who is in and who is out. But the preacher’s daunting task is to pronounce this threat, this inversion, this reversal, rather than arguing for Jesus as one, even the superior, option among many. As Williams puts it, Jesus “threatens because he does not compete . . . and because it is that whole world of rivalry and defense which is in question.”⁹

So it goes with Christian preaching in the context of pluralism. There is a way of proclaiming the truth of the gospel that, when carried out from within a competitive, market-driven social imagination, simultaneously constricts and negates that very truth. Thus, even when Jesus is proclaimed as Lord and his peaceable way offered as salvation, the meaning of Jesus has already been fitted into a competition for space in the world and, to use Williams’s words, “part of its untruth.” Belligerent, intolerant,

and “sheep-stealing” evangelists are an easy target here, but the competitive social imagination at issue is far more pervasive and seductive. It also shapes and informs trendier, less offensive preachers who busy themselves with commending Christianity to the world by attempting to show how “helpful” it can be for coping with stress, experiencing genuine community, or achieving a healthy personality, marital bliss, and economic stability. Here also the gospel is brokered as a utility or commodity from within a system of exchanges. To be a Christian is to be well adjusted, to fit in, to have it all together. As Williams says, quoting from Anita Mason’s novel *The Illusionist*: “There is a kind of truth which, when it is said, becomes untrue.”¹⁰

The truth of the matter is that the conversion to which Christ invites us and which we are called to proclaim may not necessarily help us better fit into prevailing economic and social orders. In a pluralistic context, it is tempting to compete for a space for the good news by accepting the terms of the competition whether those terms are provided by the marketplace, the political order, or the academy. Christians want the good news to get a hearing and to be received positively. So we smooth off the rough edges of the gospel and reduce its strangeness, securing its validity by laying claim to structures of truth, power, and legitimacy that will shore up its credibility or attractiveness. But the good news is a gift and can only be offered in faith, just as it can only be received by faith. There are no shortcuts here. There is no path to faith through certainty. When we impose the gospel on others politically or culturally, or seek to defend it with intellectually air-tight arguments, or subject it to the logic of marketplace exchanges, the gift is no longer a gift.

As Paul says in Romans 1, the Gospel is *the power of God* for salvation. Salvation does not lie in our power. There is even a sense in which, as Barth says, “God does not need us.” Of course, we play the role of bearing witness to God’s power. But as Barth reminds us,

The activity of the community is related to the Gospel only in so far as it is no more than a crater formed by the explosion of a shell and seeks to be no more than a void in which the Gospel reveals itself. The people of Christ, His community know that no sacred word or work or thing exists in its own right: they know only those words and works and things which by their negation are sign-posts to the Holy One. If anything Christian(!) be unrelated to the Gospel, it is a human by-product, a dangerous religious survival, a regrettable misunderstanding. For in this case content would be substituted for a void, convex for concave, positive for negative, and the characteristic marks of Christianity would be possession and self-sufficiency rather than deprivation and hope.¹¹

While Barth describes the message of the gospel as a “no” to this world, Williams reminds us that to stand outside the world in the way Jesus does is actually a way of saying “yes” to the world “by refusing the world’s own skewed and destructive account of itself” and declining to “settle for the options set before us by the world’s managers as the only things possible.”¹² Barth’s approach is largely negative, emphasizing the concave nature of the crater that is formed by the gospel’s explosion in human existence. But it is also quite possible (indeed, it is indispensable, for those of us who

stand within the Catholic–Anglican–Methodist–Holiness arc) to affirm Christian salvation as a reception that is also always a *participation* in grace. If the good news is not simply a story about what happened in some historical past or a proclamation of what is happening on the plane of eternal decrees, then we may indeed speak of conversion not merely as leaving a crater but as creating “triumphs of God’s grace,” to employ a phrase used by Charles Wesley. The gospel does indeed set a question mark against all truths and is a “no” to the entire world of rivalry, defense, and competition; but that question mark is posed in the form of a material, social, political, and economic reality effected here and now by the Holy Spirit: a communion of saints. The gospel is more than a word of judgment hurled at the world; it is a material participation in a new social body that heralds, embodies, and is the first-fruits of the good news.

All this is not to say that Barth was wrong in characterizing Christian witness as concave rather than convex, and in claiming that “no sacred word or work or thing exists in its own right.” There is also a sense in which Barth is quite right in affirming that “God does not need us,” insofar as the gospel does not need our help in selling, defending, securing, or helping it along. But the very nature of the salvation that God has given the world is people-shaped, which is to say, ecclesial. The gospel is not something that precedes its material embodiment and enactment so that it is a matter of getting the good news right to begin with and then dropping it into this or that situation appropriately “contextualized.” In a pluralistic context, the offer of the good news is not in the first instance the offer of an argument or a proof of Christ’s superiority. That would be to offer the world a recipe instead of a meal. Rather what we Christians have to offer the world is a graced enactment—in word and deed—of the forgiveness and inclusion extended by God in Christ to all. And in that sense, God does not merely need us; God’s creation of an “us” is the whole point.

Religious diversity is not a “problem” for Christians—a threat we must fear or fight. Nor do we need to see the many religions of the world as representing a crowded marketplace into which we must try to position the good news or pry open a space for it. That does not mean we should disregard or shrug off religious differences as inconsequential. What is called for in our time is careful study, respectful dialogue, and a close and sympathetic attention to the rich particularity of the stories, practices, and way of life of those who adhere to other faiths. Then, and only then, can we begin to understand other religions in such a way as to make judgments about them or what the Christian gospel might mean in relation to any given tradition. We may eventually come to the conclusion that a religion is deficient or destructive in some way, as one could well argue in the case of US civil religion, which may actually boast the most adherents of any religion in the US context, even though it is not recognized widely as a religion at all. But the first thing to be said about other faith traditions is not that they are deficient, but that they are different.

Christians have no reason to shrink from offering the gospel to others as good news even as we stand humbly in the presence of other faith traditions, encountering them on their own terms as much as possible and seeking forgiveness where wrongs have been committed. There is no contradiction between a willingness to bear faithful witness to Christ and a genuine openness to the non-Christian, even to the extent that, as Newbigin has suggested, “We are prepared to receive judgment and correction” and thus to put our own Christian faith at risk.¹³ The preaching of the good news,

however, must reject the temptation to compete for space in the world or to achieve victory over other faiths in a crowded marketplace of options. On one hand, the good news of Jesus Christ can never be at home and will always be a strange new word that risks distortion the moment it is spoken. On the other hand, Christ has already secured a place for the good news in the world—among the poor and cast out, among those who are tormented by demons, at weddings with friends and dinner in the houses of known sinners, at the foot of the cross and the door of the tomb.

Notes

1 Kathryn Tanner, “Respect for Other Religions: A Christian Antidote to Colonialist Discourse,” *Modern Theology* 9:1 (1993), 2–3.

2 *Ibid.*, 2.

3 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 9–10.

4 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 35.

5 Barth, 35.

6 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who borrows this outlook from Barth, could similarly endorse a “religionless Christianity” in his famous letter from prison on April 30, 1944; *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1953), 279–81.

7 Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 2.

8 *Ibid.*, 6.

9 *Ibid.*, 69.

10 *Ibid.*, 6.

11 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 36.

12 *Ibid.*, 88.

13 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 182.