

The Gospel and the Pluralist

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening, everyone. It's great to be with you again. I always enjoy coming to Brunfield, and Graham has given me a wonderful theme to look at.

Really, when we try to understand other people, other viewpoints, I'm often encouraged to rely upon those who are brighter than I am.

One of the great voices of the late 20th century was a man called Francis Schaeffer, and he addressed the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, and he said this.

He said, Christianity is not a series of truths in the plural, but rather truth spelled with a capital T. Truth about total reality, not just about religious things.

Biblical Christianity is truth concerning total reality and the intellectual holding of that total truth and then living in the light of that truth.

[1 : 02] So not just a series of truths in the plural, but truth with a capital T. Twenty years later, there was a survey done in the United States by the Barna Group, and the Barna Group concluded that only 4% of Americans held what could be described as a biblical worldview.

The surveyor said, although most people own a Bible and know some of its content, our research found that most Americans have little idea how to integrate core biblical principles to form a unified and meaningful response to the challenges and opportunities of life.

So what we're talking about here is how you and I see the world. So, for example, if I take off my glasses, I know that there are people here.

I can't see you very well. You're very, very blurry. Everything I see, I see through these glasses. But I'll tell you this. If you put my glasses on, I think you will be equally mystified as I am without them. You can never really put on another person's pair of glasses because they're suited for them. And as we gather tonight, we're trying to see the world through the eyes of other people.

[2 : 21] Maybe you are here tonight, and maybe this term, a pluralist, maybe this refers to you. Maybe you're not sure where you're coming from. But all of us have a way of looking at this world and of processing what this world presents to us.

And what the challenge that Schaeffer identified is this, is that if we aren't careful, if we lack not just Christian knowledge, but if we lack the ability of integrating our faith and our life, we will find ourselves quickly at drifting along or being pulled by a very different tide along to a very different destination.

Nancy Piercy, if you've ever read any of her books, she is the modern-day version of Francis Schaeffer. She wrote a book called Total Truth. And she said this. She said, The purpose of our studies and worldviews is nothing less than to liberate Christianity from its cultural captivity, unleashing power to transform the world.

The gospel is like a caged lion, said the great Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon. It does not need to be defended. It just needs to be let out of its cage.

Today, the cage is our accommodation to the secular-sacred split that reduces Christianity to a matter of private, personal belief. To unlock the cage, we need to become utterly convinced that as Francis Schaeffer said, Christianity is not merely religious truth.

[3 : 56] It is total truth. Truth about the whole of reality. And as bookends, maybe in the later part of the 20th century, Francis Schaeffer and C.S. Lewis are two significant voices.

And C.S. Lewis said this. He said, I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen. Not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else.

So the question tonight really is, do you have a worldview that is rooted in the Bible? Do you see the world through the lens of the Bible that's open in front of us?

Because if you don't, there are many alternative worldviews that are available, and you will adopt one or more of those views.

Our theme tonight is pluralism. And as we begin, we want to say that pluralism is a fact. Plural just means more than one.

[4 : 59] And there are more than one group of people. There are more than one culture. There are more than one philosophy. There's more than one religion. And we don't need to look far.

We live in a very diverse city, don't we? With all different types of employment, with different universities, and folks coming here to live and to work and to study. You've heard different accents already this evening.

So we have different cultures. Yes, we have different religions. Yes, we have different nationalities. But pluralism is more than a fact because it's a worldview.

And the worldview of pluralism really tonight signifies that celebration or that cherishing of plurality, meaning that no one group, no one philosophy, no one way of looking at the world can claim a monopoly or can claim authority or can claim unique legitimacy.

You see, we're all seeing the world and maybe we're all kind of seeing it a little bit differently, but that's a good thing. You come from your background and you see things your way.

[6 : 11] I come from my background and I see things my way. You might be a Christian. You might be a Buddhist. You might be a Muslim. You might be a Sikh or just you might choose and pick and choose.

It's like if you, I'm kind of harking back to those days when I used to go out a lot for meals. But in Edinburgh, whatever cuisine you want, you can find.

You want Thai food. You can get Thai restaurants. You want Chinese food. Plenty of Chinese restaurants. And many people will cherish pluralism as you have a choice to make.

Just be honest and have integrity and live according to the light that you have. Now this fact and worldview is a profound challenge to what we find in the Bible.

Graham's already alluded to the words of Jesus. I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. Now that statement in John chapter 14 is in direct conflict with the spirit of pluralism.

[7 : 16] The Roman Empire, when we go back into the first century AD, we want to say that pluralism is in fact biblical. Well, let me put it this way.

The Bible captures pluralism on its very pages. So pluralism is not a new thing. You think on the Jewish side of the equation, you have Sadducees and you have Pharisees.

They believe different things. You have those groups of Jews that were pro-establishment. We call them Herodians. You see, they hitched their wagon to the Roman Empire because they saw the writing on the wall.

They saw the direction of travel and they figured if we connect ourselves well to this empire, we will do well. But on the other hand of the spectrum, you had the Zealots.

They didn't like Rome and they rebelled against Rome. And if you want to include kind of like the half cousins, the Samaritans. So within that phrase or that word Jewish, there are several different groups, several different groupings.

[8 : 27] There are Jews who lived in the Middle East. There are Hellenized or Greek Jews who had their own culture. And then when you go to the other side of the world, in the other part of the world, the Gentile world, that was even more diverse.

You had the Romans and you had the Greeks. You had pagans. You had Platonists. You had Stoics. You had Epicureans. We heard that just a few moments ago.

And these are all, in many ways, very conflicting worldviews. If you're an Epicurean, and we still use that word sometimes, somebody that really likes good food is often described as an Epicurean.

They like wine and they like good food and they like the good things of life. But the Stoic was quite a different approach to the sensual pleasures of life.

Quite restricted. Quite limited. So we see here, as you read through the Scriptures, and isn't it interesting that Jesus attracts all different kinds of people from all different kinds of backgrounds.

[9 : 29] This is not a homogenous group. And the church today is not a homogenous group. We aren't a homogenous group. We look different. We speak differently.

We represent different age groups. We have different cultural backgrounds. We have different upbringings. Some of you may have grown up in a Christian home and you have heard the gospel

your whole life.

Others, like me, may have come to faith at a later age and still others may not yet be sure what you actually believe. So with this background of the plural society in which we live and of that celebration of plurality that everyone has something of the truth but no one has all of the truth.

And as we engage with a plural world in the pages of the Bible, Christianity makes an audacious claim. It makes this audacious claim that there is but one God and there is but one Savior and there is but one Gospel and there is but one Holy Book, the Bible.

Over the years, it's interesting, when you have to teach, you really have to learn your material and I tell you what, I don't know what I was doing preaching for all those years before I was ETS but I've learned so much since I started to teach.

[10:50] I came across a quote by Leslie Newbigin. He was a missionary, an Anglican missionary in India. And he captured this response from an Indian religious person.

He said, I can't understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion. And anyway, we have plenty of books of religion in India. We don't need any more. I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole creation and the history of the human race and therefore, a unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history.

That is unique. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside of it. Now, this is not to say or to prove, you might not think, this is not a proof that this is the right book or the right gospel or the right savior or the right God, but I'm suggesting that within this plural view of life, Christianity does not sit easily within pluralism because it makes unique and particular claims about God, about us, about the world, about the past, about the present, and about the future.

And we need to come to terms with what the Bible is saying to us. And if you have a chance, you could read, for example, in 1 Corinthians chapter 1, and you find there the way in which the gospel has a way of alienating all kinds of people.

[12:36] The gospel alienates the Jew. Why? It's a stumbling block. The gospel alienates a Greek. Why? It's foolishness. You see, this idea of resurrection never made much sense.

You see, people 2,000 years ago were not dumb or dull or stupid. I think C.S. Lewis used this phrase. He talked about a chronological snobbery. We are modern people or post-modern people or technically we are post-post-modern people.

So we are really bright. And those people of different generations, they're really dim. Well, 2,000 years ago, death had this characteristic of being final.

People who died stayed dead. It's a strange thing. It's just the way it was. It's just the way it is. So the ancient people aren't simple people. And the Christian gospel comes and proclaims the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

And the Greeks say this is utter foolishness. And the Jews say this is a stumbling block to us believing in what you are saying. And as we turn to Acts chapter 17, we see that the way in which the apostle Paul presents the gospel, he presents the same message, but he presents the same message to very different audiences.

[13:59] He speaks to the Thessalonians. He speaks to the Bereans. He speaks to the Athenians. And as you read through the book of Acts, you'll see that the theme remains constant.

One of the great missionaries of the modern era was a man called James O. Fraser. And he was a missionary to the Yunnan province, southwest Asia, southwest China.

And in that province, he encountered one of the local indigenous people groups called the Lisu people. And not only was the Yunnan province largely unreached by the gospel, the Lisu people were completely unreached.

Not a single Christian among their number. And Fraser comes to China and after nine months, he's going to preach his first sermon in Chinese. And he thought to himself, the best way to craft a gospel address is to look at the book that's open in front of us, the book of Acts.

I understand you're looking at it in the morning. You're going to get two doses of it today. And he said this, he said, in preparing my address, I first went through the Acts of the Apostles with a view of finding out the actual gospel we are bidden to preach.

[15:11] The result was very instructive to me. I had never imagined the gospel was so simple. Why, Peter and Paul both preached the gospel in words which would not take one minute to say.

And I found out that there are just four things that seem to be essential in preaching the gospel. The first, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. No theological explanation needed.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ. Most important of all, the gospel was never preached without this being brought in. An exhortation, three, to hearers to repent of their sins.

And four, a promise to all who believe on Jesus Christ that they will receive remission of their sins. Beyond these four points, others are mentioned occasionally, but they are not many.

In teaching Christians, it is quite another matter. To them, we are to declare the whole counsel of God as far as they can receive it. But the gospel is preached to the unsaved is as simple as it could be.

[16:14] I should not care to take the responsibility of preaching another gospel. And as we turn to the pages of Acts chapter 17, we have the same preacher with very distinct audiences.

Now, is he guilty of imbibing that pluralistic environment in which he was living? Is he guilty of preaching one message to the Jews and one message to the Greeks?

Well, I hope you're not surprised by me saying that. No, he's not. He is not imbibing the spirit of the age, but he's proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. But he's proclaiming the gospel in a manner that people can understand.

The most distinct contrast we see, Acts chapter 17, Paul in Athens, and Acts chapter 2, Peter in Jerusalem at Pentecost.

These are gospel addresses. There's a gospel response. There is gospel blessing. And yet the addresses are very different, aren't they?

[17:19] Peter is speaking to a Jewish audience who knows the scriptures, who knows the Old Testament, who knows the great promises, who knows the great prophecy. Whereas Paul is speaking to an audience that knows the Greek philosophers, but knows next to nothing about Jesus Christ.

And yet we see that the power of the gospel can only accompany the gospel. Men and women can only be transformed by this message.

So if there is gospel blessing, there must be gospel preaching. There must be a conveying of the good news concerning Jesus Christ. When Paul goes to Thessalonica, his pattern, of course, is to search out the Jewish community.

He is a Jew. He knows them. They know him. He knows where they're coming from. They know where he's coming from. And when he gets to Thessalonica, what does he do? He reasons with them from the Sabbath, explaining and proving that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. Jesus died and Jesus rose. And this Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ. Some were persuaded and yet some were enraged.

[18:36] That's one way you know that the gospel is being proclaimed. You see gospel blessing and you see gospel opposition together. We see that in Athens and we'll see that in a few moments.

So, when we turn to the Christian message, now, we need to be clear on this. Because other religions and other world views are seeking to give answers to life's questions.

We're not going to deny that. Because everyone is looking for answers. Everyone is looking for insight. Everyone is looking for a way of making sense. Where have I come from?

Why am I here? Where am I going? So, we shouldn't be surprised that many people are asking the same questions and seeking answers to those questions. But we need to be clear that Christianity presents a unique answer to these common questions.

The best explanation I was given many years ago now was most, if not all, world views, philosophies, and religions largely suggest that the problems of life are outside of ourselves.

[19:47] You know, you. You know, in this context, if I have problems, the problems are largely with you. Whereas the solutions are largely here.

You're the problem for me, but the solution is somewhere within me if I can just find it. If I can just understand it. If I can just realize it. If I can dig deep. Now, you might not be surprised at me saying is the Christian worldview is completely opposite.

Because the Christian worldview says there is a problem, but that problem is primarily internal. My major problems are me, not you. And your major problems are you and not me.

But what Christianity says without hesitation is that the solution is completely outside of ourselves. Even if we realize that we are the problem, and even if we realize that we can't fix the problem, the solution has to come completely outside of ourselves to us.

Now, that sharply distinguishes a pluralistic worldview, which suggests that we all have part of the truth, some of the truth. Maybe some ideas are more or less valid.

[21 : 02] Some ideas are more or less helpful. No. The Bible and the gospel says there's a problem. There's one main problem that's called sin, where I put myself at the center of my world, and I want everyone to orbit that center.

I want things done my way, when I want, how I want, as I want. God is useful only insofar as he serves my ends.

That's a problem. That's a problem from a biblical point of view, because you and I are not the center of the universe. God is the center of all things, for from him and to him and through him are all things.

To him be glory forever and ever. Amen. So there is one problem, and you see, God not only has to solve the problem, he has to tell us about the problem because we're not going to get it.

Not only are we not going to get the solution, we're not even going to figure out what the problem is. And that's why we need the Bible open before us, because the Bible tells us, here is the problem.

[22 : 02] There's a human heart that's darkened, a human mind that's clouded, human emotions, human actions, human thoughts, everything about us has been corrupted.

Why? Because we've inherited a nature. You know, we all have inheritance. You know, we look like our parents, we act like our parents, we have genetic characteristics, and we have personality traits. But the Bible tells us that we've inherited something from our first parents, an inclination to sin. So not only does God have to tell us the problem, not only does God have to explain the problem to us, God has to tell us and provide for us the solution.

God the Father sends God the Son on a rescue mission. God the Son lives a perfect life, dies a sacrificial death, rises from the grave, ascends to heaven, and the Father and the Son then send the Spirit, God the Holy Spirit, to take what belongs to Jesus and to apply it to us.

Because even when we're presented with a solution, we are completely incapable of receiving it. Such is the nature of human sin and such is the implication of the fall that we're dead, Paul says.

[23 : 23] We are dead in sins and dead in transgressions, dead in mind, dead in heart, dead spiritually. So God must make us alive. Now when we begin to compare that view of the world to any other worldview, we have to say, now Christianity might be wrong, but Christianity cannot be easily or at all incorporated into a pluralistic worldview.

It's just impossible. people. And you see, in fact, if we're being fair to other worldviews, neither can they. You see, I think it's actually quite patronizing and quite insulting to say to someone who follows another world religion, well, you actually believe pretty much what I believe.

Because I don't think they do. And neither do they. I think we need to be honest with ourselves. I think we need to be honest with each other. That doesn't mean to be insulting, and that doesn't mean to be patronizing, but to say, well, look, if this is what you believe, and this is what I believe, these are different beliefs.

I remember I was involved for many years in university chaplaincy. It's an interesting experience. And in the university chaplaincy, I met many different chaplains from many different Christian traditions.

The ones that I had most affinity with were the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox, because they had a firm set of beliefs. They had a firm idea of what they believed, what was right, what was wrong, and where it came from.

[24 : 59] I would say alongside the Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox, the next natural affinity was the Muslim chaplain. It was quite remarkable.

I remember one time talking about Eid and talking about the various festivals, and I never realized that Hajj, was a form of Hagar.

Remember Abraham and Hagar? Well, you see, we're big on Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac, right? Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. Those are the three for us, right? But from the Muslim worldview, it's Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael.

And my Muslim friend, the chaplain, he said, we believe that the child of promise was Ishmael. He didn't say it provocatively. He didn't say it insultingly. He just said, this is what we believe. Now, you can't reconcile those two, can you?

We say the child of promise was Isaac through Sarah. They say the child of promise was Ishmael through Hagar. Now, it's patronizing to say to these two people, you're saying the same thing.

[26 : 00] They're patently not saying the same thing. One might be right, the other wrong. They might both be wrong, but they can't possibly be right. And that's one of the great weaknesses of this pluralistic worldview.

We're not saying that there aren't plurality. Of course, there is. But the worldview that says we're all pretty much saying something of the same, or we're kind of moving in the same direction, or we've kind of captured something of a similar truth.

well, we're not. And I think it's unfair to say so. So Paul speaks to the Thessalonians. He preaches the gospel to the Jews.

And what happens? There's a riot. Some believe. Some are persuaded. Others are enraged. It's now time for Paul to leave.

And you see, Paul is proclaiming that there is another king. You see, there's a source of authority here, and that source of authority isn't Jesus. The source of authority isn't you and isn't me.

[27 : 05] The source of authority is not Caesar, is Jesus. Jesus is this other king. He's called Jesus, another king.

Paul then goes on to Berea, and again, he's speaking to a Jewish audience. They examined the scriptures. They were eager to make sure that what Paul was saying was right.

But again, that crowd from Thessalonica, they found their way to Berea, and it was time for Paul to leave. So Paul is preaching Jesus. He's preaching the gospel.

He's preaching the message, and there is a reaction. Some believe, and some respond, and then he comes to a very different setting. He comes to Athens, and the first thing he does was let the city speak to him.

He listens, and if we're wise, we listen before we speak. We listen to what the city says. We listen to what the culture says. We listen to what people think, and if they don't tell us, we ask them, what do you think?

[28 : 08] What do you believe? Because when Paul was there, he saw that this city was not irreligious, but very religious. And you see, maybe modern Scotland is not so much non-religious, it's just multi-religious.

Everybody has different ideas of what they worship. They worship many different things. They might not call them gods, but they worship many different gods. And Paul realizes that as he circulates, as he listens, and as he speaks, what does he do?

He tells the good news in verse 18. He tells the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. salvation. It's the same theme. It's the same gospel.

It's the same Jesus. The same Jesus that caused a riot in Thessalonica, the same Jesus that caused a revival in Jerusalem when Peter preached the Pentecost, is the same Jesus that Paul preaches here in Athens.

They're interested, they're curious, they're talkers, they're thinkers, believers, and then Paul gets an opportunity to speak. And what does he do?

[29 : 21] He finds a bridge. You see, there's always a bridge. There's always a bridge between the gospel and people. Well, one reason is this.

We are all made in the image of God. We are all made by God. We are all made for God. We are made to know Him. So there is always a bridge. We just need to look for it.

And Paul found that bridge in the altar to an unknown God. This very religious people, they were worshipping all different kinds of gods. And they recognized that maybe they might have missed the real God, so they had an altar to an unknown God.

And Paul says, I'm going to introduce this God to you. You don't know Him, but I do. You worship Him as unknown. Let me tell you who He is, and let me tell you what He is like.

And what does Paul do? He preaches. He preaches in a way that is understandable, that is comprehensible. He finds that bridge, the altar. He finds the poets, the philosophers.

[30 : 26] He connects with the culture. Quoting the Old Testament do no good. They don't know the Old Testament, but they do know their Greek poets. They do know their philosophers.

And Paul is constantly finding bridges between the gospel and people. And maybe that should be our prayer as we go into the world. God, give me a bridge with my neighbor.

God, give me an entry point. Give me some way of conveying the gospel in a way that makes sense to them. Not just in a way that makes sense to me. Help me convey the gospel in a way that makes sense to someone who does not share my biblical worldview.

Someone who does not understand what the scriptures are saying. And Paul conveys Jesus. He speaks about judgment.

He speaks about resurrection. He calls people to repent. Again, this is a Greek audience. This is a philosophical audience. This is a pluralistic audience.

[31 : 30] There's Epicureans and there's Stoics. There's talkers. There's thinkers. There's any number of different people with any number of different backgrounds. But he says he's given proof in verse 31.

For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.

The time is coming. The message now is repent. And you see, sometimes the Bible uses shorthand. You see, when you're commanded to repent, implied in a command to repent is believe. When you're commanded to believe, implied in the command to believe is repent. The two things go together. You can't separate them. Jesus' first sermon, repent and believe the good news.

The kingdom of God is at hand. The time has come. Repent and believe the good news. God is God is proclaiming Jesus to a Jewish audience.

[32 : 31] In Thessalonica, he's proclaiming Jesus to a Greek audience, to a philosophical audience in Athens. And in each of these situations, something happens.

When you share the gospel, something happens. When the gospel is proclaimed, something happens. The one thing that can never happen when the gospel is proclaimed is nothing. Because God promises that whenever his word goes forth, it will accomplish what he purposes.

And that for which he has sent it. That's his commitment. And that's his promise. One of the great voices in the 18th century was a man called George Whitefield.

He said this, he said, other men may preach the gospel better than I, but no man can preach a better gospel. The gospel is powerful.

Paul said it himself. I'm not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe. So when you find that bridge, when you find that point of contact, you have to make a beeline to the gospel.

[33 : 37] You need to make a beeline to Jesus because just building bridges is not sufficient. We need to proclaim the good news. We need to tell something about Jesus' death. We need to tell something about his resurrection.

We need to convey something about his call to repentance, and we need to convey something, as Fraser said to that Chinese audience about that promise that to those who repent, their sins will be forgiven.

This simple formula is powerful. When the gospel is proclaimed, step back and watch out because God will do something.

We don't know what, we don't know when, we don't know how, but we know that he will do something. I want to close by reading a passage at the very end of the Bible, Revelation.

It's in chapter 7 of that wonderful book. And you see, the Bible is pluralistic in its content and describing the world of the first century, but the Bible is also pluralistic in describing heaven because it tells us about all nations and all peoples and all tribes and all tongues.

[34 : 45] Revelation 7 and verse 9. After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count. From every nation, tribe, people, and language standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

They were wearing white robes and they were holding palm branches in their hands and they cried out in a loud voice, salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

So here we have all nations, all peoples, all tribes, all tongues, and what do we have? One place, one throne, one song, one savior, one way, one hope.

That's what we have in the gospel. We have a message of universal relevance, universal application, of universal invitation to all peoples, all world views, all philosophies, all world religions, whoever, wherever, whenever.

There's again a great quote I love quotations. I'm sure Graham is sick of me quoting in class, but I'll close with a man who himself has a level of enthusiasm. He has a similar accent to mine, but I can't do John Piper.

[36 : 00] But if I could, I would say this. God is pursuing with omnipotent passion a worldwide purpose of gathering joyful worshipers for himself. From every tribe and tongue and people and

nation, he has an inexhaustible enthusiasm for the supremacy of his name among the nations. Therefore, let us bring our affections into line with his, and for the sake of his name, let us renounce the quest for worldly comforts and join his global purpose. There is going to be a day when all tribes, tongues, and nations are gathered in front of the throne. In that day, we will see what God has done. Until that day, let us seek, with all the strength, with all the wisdom, with all the courage, to bring people to a knowledge of Jesus. We cannot save them, but we can convey something of this truth to them. And when we do so, we can confidently state and be confident that God will use even our feeble, weak efforts to accomplish his steadfastness and powerful purposes. [37 : 11] So may God bless you. And if you happen to be a pluralist here tonight, I would ask you to please consider the Lord Jesus Christ. You will find no greater Savior. You will find no greater gospel. And you will find no greater assurance for the future than when you find him. May God bless you all.