

Postmodernism & Evangelism

Let us pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for this day. We thank You for Your love for us in creating us and providing for us, and in caring for our needs day by day as You do for the whole creation. Father, we thank You for Your love in sending Your Son to die for us and to rise again, that we might have eternal fellowship with You. We thank You for Your Spirit whom You have sent to draw us to Yourself and to create new life in our hearts. And Father, we pray today that You will give us Your Spirit to grant us understanding that our minds and hearts may be renewed in our love for You, our desire to understand Your truth, our desire to walk in Your ways, and our desire to have compassion for those around us whom You have shown to us. So teach us, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

We have been looking at the four parts of the wall that very often describe our response, as Christians, to our culture. These are the problems of intimidation and fear, condemnation or judgment, cultural retreat into the haven of the church, and personal separation in order to keep ourselves pure. And in our last couple of sessions we have been suggesting that this wall ought not to exist at all, and that we should replace it with trust in the Lord, with love instead of condemnation, even when the world makes itself the enemy of Christ's Church, of the Gospel, and of us personally. Jesus challenges us to love our enemies and to do good to those who hate us, to bless those who curse us. God's Word calls us to cultural engagement rather than cultural retreat. That is what it means to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And God's Word calls us to personal commitment in friendship with unbelievers, because this is who Jesus Christ Himself was. So we replace those four walls with this commitment to be in the world as Christ called us to be. And we may summarize all of these things by saying that what we are actually called to do is to imitate Christ, to imitate the incarnation. That is, we are to live in the world in order that we might be a blessing to it, and we are to be priests of the world rather than those who are denouncing it.

Now this brings us to our final section as we look at the consequences of postmodernism and our responses to it. Now, what I want to do in this last section here, before we turn to look in detail at some of the biblical material about apologetics and evangelism, is reflect on what we have been discussing these past few sessions and think about what this is going to mean for evangelism and for our outreach. We come back to this wall, this four-part wall that we have been reflecting on, which I know has been very, very challenging to many of us. If we live with a daily reality of such a wall between us and the unbelievers around us, this creates enormous challenges to evangelism. We know that Christ has commissioned us to go into the world to proclaim the Gospel, but if we live with the reality of this wall of intimidation, condemnation, cultural retreat, and personal separation, then the only way evangelism is going to take place, if we accept that this wall is appropriate, will be in the following patterns. Our teaching on evangelism will focus on one-time events and on getting, for example, a big name evangelist for ourselves, our ministry, and our churches, to come and do for us the work that we find very difficult to do. Or, our focus on evangelism will emphasize the techniques of conversation such as, "These are the five things that we need to say to non-Christians." The purpose of many of the methods of evangelism that are taught is to teach Christians how to talk to non-Christians simply because Christians feel uncomfortable talking to non-Christians. And so the focus of our evangelism is going to be on methods, techniques of conversation, tracts and pamphlets, door to door evangelism, and street corner evangelism. Now, there is nothing wrong with these. That is not my point. Of course God uses such methods, whether it is getting a big name evangelist to come and have a series of meetings in our church or in our city, whether it is teaching the members of our congregation a method of how to present the

Gospel to unbelievers, or whether it is door to door evangelism or writing tracts and publishing them. Whatever it is, of course God uses these means to save some people. But we should notice that it is not because these methods or approaches are the most faithful to Scripture or are the most effective means of reaching people. In fact, many of the evangelism methods that we use in our churches and in our ministries to reach out to people bear less and less fruit the more post-Christian people around us become. Such methods depend on people already having a solid knowledge of the Bible and of Christianity.

Let us say that the conversational method I use begins with “You are a sinner; Jesus died for you and rose again for you; repent and believe in the Gospel.” If we start with a method like that or if we begin with a set of questions that focus on the reality of the person facing the judgment of God—there is nothing wrong, of course, with such questions or with making such statements to people, they are true—those statements require that the people we are speaking to already understand what we are saying. Such methods basically assume that the people to whom we are talking already have quite a knowledge of the Bible and a respect for it, that they already have a deep belief in the God whom the Bible declares to us, that they already have a respect and honor for the person of Jesus Christ, and that they already have a sense that they are sinners and that sin renders them accountable to God and worthy of His judgment. In other words, such approaches basically assume that people already have a Christian worldview, and the more postmodern, or the more post-Christian people become, the less and less effective such means are, because they have all sorts of assumptions in them about what people already know and understand. If you try to use such approaches, for example in a country like France, which is one of the most deeply skeptical and cynical cultures in the world, these approaches are almost totally ineffective. And the same is true among most people in the younger generation in the United States. The more secularized people are, the less effective these methods will be.

Now later we will look at this issue carefully and biblically, because you will see in the book of Acts when Paul is talking to people who are in the synagogue, people who already have a knowledge of the God whom the Bible declares and a respect for the Word of God, Paul is able to begin by speaking about sin, judgment, the death and resurrection of Christ, repentance, and faith. But when Paul is in a Gentile context outside the synagogue where people do not have that knowledge of the Bible and of the basics of the biblical worldview, Paul does not begin with the person of Jesus Christ and with sin, repentance, and faith. He begins in a completely different place, which is who God is and the nature of idolatry. But we will look at that carefully later. You might say that Paul changes what he says because of where the people are. And many of the methods of evangelism that we learn have all kinds of value—I am not saying they are without value, that is not my point—and we will look at that question later, too. Is it helpful for us to learn, or to know thoroughly, a summary of the Gospel? And we can answer that—of course it is. It is appropriate because Christianity is the truth and therefore it has a certain content that can indeed be summarized. That is why the church has always had creeds. Of course the Gospel can be summarized, and of course it is helpful to know the basics of the Christian faith, that this is what somebody needs to believe and that this is what needs to be communicated to them for that person to become a Christian. So there is nothing wrong, in and of itself, in learning a simple summary of the Gospel or how to communicate that to people. The real issue is whether it communicates with people where they are and whether it is actually truly faithful to what the New Testament teaches us about communicating the Gospel to people. And we will look at that question in more detail later as well. Think of the examples we looked at in the last session, with Jesus speaking to the teacher of the law and, more briefly, with Jesus speaking to the rich young ruler. You remember that I summarized those by saying that every conversation Jesus has with people is different, because before He tells them some aspect of the truth He finds out who they are, where they are, and what their understanding is. And that is really what the Bible requires of us in evangelism, that we communicate to particular people particular

truths that they need to hear, rather than assuming that everybody out there is at the same place and needs to hear right now precisely the same words. But we will look at that question carefully later.

But here I will simply say this. Many of the techniques of evangelism that we are taught assume that people have a biblical understanding already. And these techniques will be far more effective among older people and among people who already have a church background, especially an evangelical or conservative church background, than they will be among people who are more secularized. Now, in fact the truth about how God saves people today is this: Paul Weston, an evangelist, says, "All the statistical evidence goes to show that those within our secularized societies who are being drawn out of unbelief to faith in Christ say that they are drawn through the friendship of a local congregation and of its members." They are drawn through the friendship of individual Christians in churches who get to know them, or through Christian ministries because, of course, this is taking place on campuses all over the country as well as through various kinds of campus ministries.

And so, first of all, it is within the local congregation and by contact with its members that the Good News of Jesus Christ is most clearly understood and taken in by those who are not yet Christians. Or to put it another way, it is mostly within the context of relational, personal friendship, dialogue, and witness that the Gospel is most fruitfully shared. In fact the figures are something like this. Nine out of ten people from our secularized societies who become Christians become Christians primarily through contact with individual believers who have become friends with them and begun to share the Gospel with them. Now, the final conversion may take place listening to a sermon at an evangelistic meeting, during a worship service, or at a Bible study, but the primary contact is the contact with the individual Christian in a church, on a campus, in a workplace, etc. And we may say it is the impact of the lives of those Christians who befriend unbelievers that has spoken most powerfully to those from our secular society who are drawn to Christianity. The impact of the lives opens people to hear the words. Now, why should this surprise us? It is thoroughly biblical. Christ is for us the perfect union of Word and life: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory." And Jesus calls us to imitate that. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." I am not downplaying the importance of words; that is not my point. But it is the quality of the lives of Christians, the reality of righteousness, the reality of love, the reality of friendship, and the beauty of holiness that attracts the unbeliever and that is used by God to open his or her heart to listen to and to pay attention to the truth. And the more wounded people are by the brokenness of our postmodern culture, the more they are going to need to see that reality of the Word made flesh in order for them to pay attention. This is something I observed constantly working in L'Abri. Non-Christians would come and stay with us, and as they saw our lives, our relationships in our marriages, the way we treated our children, the way we treated one another in working together, and the way we treated them, they began to pay attention to what we were saying. And you could see their hearts and minds opening up to the truth as the days, weeks, and months went by.

Now, what this means is that often when our churches think about evangelism, we make a focus that is slightly off target. If we begin with saying, "Well, we will do evangelism by having a big crusade or by having an outreach meeting," we are not starting in quite the right place. Now again those things are perfectly appropriate to have; I am not criticizing such things. But if that is where we begin, we are not starting in quite the right place. Let me give an illustration. Back in the late 70s or early 80s, Billy Graham came to the United Kingdom, and that particular crusade, his organization said, was the most fruitful crusade with which he had ever been involved. But of course the crusade, the meetings at which he spoke, were not all that took place. I was a pastor there at the time, and for a year and a half before he came, churches all over the country were praying for the crusade. Churches all over the country were preparing for his coming. Christians all over the country were preparing to invite to those meetings the

non-Christians whom they were already involved with in relational dialogue and witness. And almost all the non-Christians who came to those meetings and were converted had already had long contacts, friendships, or relationships with individual believers from local congregations and other Christian groups around the nation. And after the meetings were over, those people were followed up by the people who already knew them. We had several people in our own congregation who were converted at those meetings, and we were very thankful for that. It was very evident that God used that crusade, so I am not speaking against crusades. Hear me carefully, and do not say after this, "Jerram is opposed to evangelistic meetings or to evangelistic methods." I am not at all. But we have to see them in the context of something deeper and broader in terms of the work of God in people's lives and through His people to unbelievers. So that crusade was extraordinarily successful, but it was because it did not stand by itself. God used Billy Graham mightily, as He has done in many countries and in the lives of many people. I know a considerable number of people who became Christians at Billy Graham crusades, people in every denomination across the face of the United States. Run-off events, like a crusade, bear fruit within a context of ongoing relationships with unbelievers and of the community life of the church being real and open to unbelievers, of course. Just think, for example, of the enormous numbers of people converted on the day of Pentecost and in the days after. It was not the first time that they had met a Christian, heard the Gospel, or been challenged. We are told in the early chapters of Acts that huge numbers of Pharisees became believers. Who can doubt that most of these people had heard Jesus' teaching over and over again, and that many of them had all sorts of personal contact with Him? In fact, Jesus says to His disciples on another occasion, "You have the privilege of reaping a harvest you did not sow." And as you read through the Gospels, you see many occasions where it does not tell us that anybody was converted when Jesus spoke. But many of those people to whom He spoke were converted after His death and resurrection, through the ministry of the apostles.

Evangelism takes time, and a lot of our teaching about evangelism does not really reflect on that issue. Evangelism is often presented as if it were a matter of instant communication and instant response, whether it is instant communication in a sermon, an evangelistic talk, or innocent communication one on one as I share the basics of the Gospel, and then the person becomes a Christian. Now, that is not usually how people are saved. Evangelism takes time. Think about your own conversion. Conversion is the fruit, the end product of a process through which the Holy Spirit has been working in the heart of the individual for days, weeks, months, and often years, through all sorts of means. And it is something else we are going to look at carefully biblically as we go along. But conversion is the end of the work of the Holy Spirit using all the different means He uses to bring someone to Himself.

Recent studies show that the average time of coming to faith from the first contact with a Christian varies radically from culture to culture. For example, if you are called by God to go to minister in Japan or in France, two countries where there are very small numbers, about 1% of the population, of Bible-believing Christians, the average time that it takes for someone to become a Christian after their first serious contact with a believer is 10 years. See, we assume so easily, because we see churches growing very rapidly in the United States right now, that if we do certain things churches will grow. But that has more to do with what is happening in American culture than with us getting the methods just right. If we are Reformed at all, we need to really know that God is the One who saves people, and that this is His sovereign work. Getting the methods of church planting or the methods of evangelism right is not what God uses to save people. Now I am not speaking against methods of evangelism or methods of church planting. Many of them are very wise; they developed because of people seeking to understand the moment of history in which we are living, what God uses in this context to draw people to Himself, and what, we might say, the pathways and bridges are in the culture right now. But we can sometimes make the assumption that these methods, or these means, are just instantly transferable from culture to culture, and they are not.

For example, in St. Louis you can look at some of the churches that have grown so rapidly over the last five or so years. We must not assume that if we did those same things in another part of America, or in another culture in another part of the world, that the churches would automatically grow like that. You could go to France, for example, and you could do all the same things with the same amount of commitment and devotion to the Lord, and after 25 years you might have 30 or 40 people. And you would think that was wonderful in France. I am serious. You would think it was wonderful. We need to be much more humble about what we are doing, in the sense of recognizing that this harvest we have is God's wonderful work. And of course, if you spoke to the pastors at the rapidly growing churches, they would all say precisely that. What I just said is not a criticism of those churches. Praise God, as they do, for the tremendous growth that they have experienced. But this is the work of God, given the moment in which we live; it is not simply a consequence of doing the right things. So, evangelism takes time. If we are in France or Japan, on the average, and of course there are exceptions for this, it takes about 10 years for somebody to become a Christian after their first contact. In Britain right now the average is four to five years after the first contact. In the United States, it depends very much on the part of the country in which you are living, the kind of people, and how old they are, but the average is anywhere between two and four years.

Now, that is just a statistical summary. Of course there are exceptions to that. Some people take far longer to come to faith; some people come to faith very quickly. I can look at examples from my own life on a few occasions working in L'Abri and since I have been in St. Louis, where I have met people and seen them very rapidly come to faith in Christ. But I think of other examples. One of my dearest friends in St. Louis, whose home I lived in when I was a student 33 years ago, still has not become a Christian. I am confident that God is going to save him. But evangelism takes time. Well, let me just give some examples from my own family, the people I know really well. As soon as I was converted, I started praying earnestly and regularly for them, not as faithfully as I should, none of us ever does. But I was praying for them, seeking to be obedient to Scripture and to live the truth before them. Just like Peter says to women whose husbands are unbelievers, win them by your life: "Win them, without a word, by your behavior." I became a Christian in November 1966, and I started immediately praying for the members of my family, none of whom were believers. And I went home and I started trying to live the truth and communicate it to them as soon as I could, as soon as God opened doors and gave me opportunities. But the first member of my family to become a Christian was my younger sister in something like October of 1971. I graduated from this seminary in the spring of 1971 and we went back, by God's providence, to work at the English branch of L'Abri, which was started just about 15 miles from where my parents lived, which was a wonderful answer to our prayers. During our last couple of years here in St. Louis, we were praying all the time for my family, of course, but we prayed that we would be able to go back and live near them. The seminary was urging me to stay here and teach, and I just felt constrained to go back to live near my family, because they knew no other Christians. And my father was elderly; he was in his mid-seventies and very ill. And so we felt compelled by the Holy Spirit to return to England to be near them. Through a series of events the Lord opened the door with L'Abri, and it was only 15 miles from where my parents lived! And so we went back there right after graduation and, of course, continued praying for my family, seeking to live the truth before them, and seeking to share it. My sister became a Christian that fall, which was five years after my conversion.

My father was converted the next spring in April, just six weeks before he died of stomach cancer. He actually became a Christian with Frances Schaeffer. I had been going over to see him every day. He was very, very ill, losing weight very rapidly, and every day we talked. My father was a communist, a Marxist, and every day we had been talking about those areas in his life where he was constrained by God's truth: his love for the family, his wonderful commitment to marriage, and his deep care for people in need. My parents were extraordinarily hospitable and generous. They were very, very poor, but they

would send us around our village with baskets of food at Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving for people who had even less than they did. And he had such a passion for social justice and economic justice. We would be able to start talking at those points, and I tried to show him that those things that he held on to in righteousness from God's truth had absolutely no place in Marxism whatsoever, and they only find their meaning in relationship to the Word of God and the existence of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. So all the things that were precious to him really are fruits of biblical truth. That is what I was communicating to him, and he was really listening. On that particular day, we had one of these old fashioned doctors who did not believe in telling people what was wrong with them, and my father was quite sure that he had cancer and he knew perfectly well that he was dying. And I called the doctor that morning and I said to him, "My father knows perfectly well he is dying, and he is sure he has cancer. It is time for you to tell us the truth about what is going on." And he said, "Well, yes, he has stomach cancer." It was the first time he had ever said that, and he said, "And he has about six weeks to live." It was not really what I expected, but it was pretty devastating all the same. And I went immediately to share it with my colleague, Ranald, and he came back half an hour later and said, "As you, know Schaeffer is here"—he was visiting just for a couple of days from Switzerland—"and he would like to go and see your father, if he would like that." So I telephoned my father and he said, "There is nothing I would like more." And it was so obvious that he was ready, that the Spirit had prepared him to be saved, and so I took Schaeffer over there, and he spent a couple of hours with him, and my father became a Christian that morning. And that was how my dad became a believer, and as I said he died just six weeks later, but his life changed so dramatically in those six weeks. As I mentioned earlier, he would curse every third word, basically, and blaspheme, and that just disappeared completely, without anybody saying anything at all, just simply the work of God in his heart. And he had, even though he was dying in the most terrible pain, just a radiant confidence.

My elder brother became a Christian that fall, in the fall of 1972. And then my mother converted on the anniversary of my father's death when I went to spend the day with her. So with the members of my family, from my sister who was the first to become a believer, it was five years after I started praying for her and longing to communicate the truth to her, and with the rest of my family it took another six or seven years. Evangelism takes time. With my stepfather, my mother married again, it took basically 22 years. He became a believer just in the year before he died; he died a year and a half ago. And it was just in that last year or so of his life in his 80s that he was converted, and he was a very difficult person who made my mother's life very unhappy. He was extraordinarily difficult to love, one of the most difficult people I have ever met. On my mother's wedding day, and I performed the wedding, he got drunk and flirted outrageously with my wife. I could have struck him. I do not know if you have ever heard of the pastor striking the groom, but that is what I felt like doing. He was extraordinarily difficult to love. He was jealous of our children, so my mother could hardly spend any time with them. He was very, very self-centered and restricted her life so dramatically, but she prayed for him, loved him, and served him, no matter how difficult he was. And we sought to love him, care for him, and be kind to him no matter how difficult he was. And eventually God saved him. Evangelism takes time.

There is one thing you all need to do when God gives you the privilege of leading somebody to faith, and He will give you that privilege because He is in the business of saving people. He really cares for people in a much deeper way than we ever do. But when God gives you the privilege of leading somebody to faith, all those of you who are going to be preachers, when you have the privilege of seeing somebody respond to your preaching and come to faith in Christ, one of the first things you need to do is sit down with that person afterward and ask him or her some questions. Ask the person the question, "How is it that you have come to this moment? Tell me the history of what God has been doing in your life." We take far too much credit to ourselves when we see somebody come to faith. God has usually been at work in this person's life for many years and through all sorts of means when they come to faith.

You ask any individual to reflect on what has brought him to this moment of faith, and he is going to tell you a history. And in every case, that history is going to be different. Let us think of some examples from the New Testament. We are all familiar with the account in Acts 8 of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. And it is a wonderful example of what appears, at first sight, to be an instant conversion story. I remember one of my students in class years ago saying, “Evangelists love to tell airplane stories of how they sat next to somebody on a plane and led the person to faith.” And of course, sometimes that is true. But that is not usually how people come to faith, and one of the effects of such stories can sometimes be to make you feel, “I wish I was as clever as that evangelist. I wish I knew exactly what to say.” And of course, God does lead people to salvation through sitting next to people on planes. A dear friend of mine had the privilege of leading somebody to faith flying back from California, but in that case, he had known the guy for years and been praying for him for years. They had gone out to California on a vacation together with a group of men, and on the way back this guy said to him, “Tell me, Joe, what is it that is so different about you, and why? I know that you are a Christian, you have told me that often enough, but I want to hear about why it has made such a difference in your life.” And Joe’s friend came to faith. From time to time I see that guy who came to faith that day on the plane. So, evangelists can tell you airplane stories.

This is a chariot story in Acts 8, as they did not have airplanes in those days. This was the means of transportation at the time if you were going long distance. The Ethiopian eunuch is traveling by chariot back to Ethiopia. Now when you read this story of what we might call sudden and dramatic conversion, because that is what it is, we should notice that what the text draws attention to is not what a wonderful evangelist Philip was. But it draws attention to God and the work that He did in bringing this guy to faith. It is God who sends Philip by extraordinary means, in this case, to this road. The Holy Spirit tells Philip to go to this place, because he is going to meet somebody there. You see, God desires to save this person, and so he takes Philip there. Verse 26 says, “An angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Go south to the road, the desert road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’” So he started out, and there is this man in a chariot. He is the treasurer of the queen of the Ethiopians, and he is reading the Bible, the Old Testament, in his chariot. Verse 29 says, “And the Spirit told Philip, ‘Go to that chariot and stay near it.’” And so the Holy Spirit singles out this particular man. It is a divine encounter, and you will have had such divine encounters with people, where you are aware that God has brought you together with somebody. God is at work in your heart and life, and He is at work in this person, and that is why you have been brought together. I have had encounters on planes like that too, some quite remarkable ones, and it is really fun to tell those stories. But one of the most interesting ones I ever had, just a little aside here, was meeting the lead singer of The Stranglers, the punk rock group. We sat next to each other on the plane all the way back from Australia to England. It was a long flight with lots of time to say some things. And I saw this very odd looking group of guys getting onto the plane and I thought, “I wonder who they are,” and one of them, the oddest looking one, came and sat next to me. So that was kind of fun. But we had a very interesting conversation. I still pray for him, I have to say, because we really had a wonderful conversation. But it is God who brings these encounters together; it is not because we are so good at doing anything. It is God who does this, just as on this occasion.

Now when you read this encounter and see this person come to faith, you think here is this dramatic and sudden conversion. But as you read it you realize there is a history to this story. And there are two accounts of that in the account that is given to us here in Acts 8. The first clue is this man is on his way back from Jerusalem where he has been to worship God. This is not a typical pagan. Here is a man who is already a worshipper of the one true God, the God of Israel, and he has come from a very great distance to worship God in the temple in Jerusalem. Now I have a naturally inquisitive mind, and I want to ask why this guy was going to Jerusalem to worship God and how he knew about the God of Israel. And one day, of course, we can ask him face to face and say, “Tell us your history. What brought you

there?” And we can make some interesting speculations. We know that there were some believers in the God of Israel going back for hundreds of years—for a very long time. There is a wonderful account in the book of Jeremiah (you can read it in Jeremiah 38 and 39) of an Ethiopian called Ebed-melech, who was the servant of the king in Jerusalem and who is a believer. You are going to meet that guy in heaven. I remember having the privilege of preaching in Galilee Baptist Church down in the inner-city of St. Louis during black history month a couple of years ago, and I preached on Ebed-melech, a black diamond in God’s Word. Ebed-melech is the one person who so loves the Lord that he has mercy on Jeremiah when Jeremiah is thrown in the well to die and just left there up to his neck in mud without food. And Ebed-melech is the one who has him taken out. It is a considerable danger to himself, and he saves Jeremiah’s life. It is a wonderful story. And God’s words to Ebed-melech at the end of that story are beautiful words. So we know there are believers going back to that time from Ethiopia. It is probable that Jeremiah himself was put to death in Ethiopia, or in southern Egypt or northern Ethiopia, because that is where he is taken off by the rebellious remnant left in the land after the captivity, and it is probably historical that that is where Jeremiah died. And it is probably him the book of Hebrews is referring to when it talks about some who were sawn in two. Jewish history thinks of that as being Jeremiah, killed eventually by his own people down there in northern Ethiopia. So there are believers there, going back to the time of Jeremiah and back to the time of Solomon. If you read the biblical account, people came from all over the place to worship God in Jerusalem and to hear the wisdom of Solomon. And there were believers there going back to the time of Moses; we read of Ethiopians there in that account of the life of Moses. Now whether this man, this Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, is a descendent of one of these people or these groups of people who had come to worship the God of Israel, we do not know. We can ask him one day, but God had been at work there for a long time. There is a wonderful psalm that talks about people from Ethiopia having their names written in God’s book of life. It is a wonderful missionary psalm that I will often preach about if I am asked to preach at the mission conference of a church. It is Psalm 87. It talks about how God loves Jerusalem. “Glorious things are said of you, oh city of God. I will record Rahab and Babylon.” Rahab there means Egypt, a poetic name for Egypt. “...Egypt and Babylon among those who acknowledge me—Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush,” that is Ethiopia. These, Egypt, Babylon, Philistia, and Tyre, are the enemies of the people of Israel, and Cush is a far distant country, Ethiopia. “And we will say, ‘This one was born in Zion.’” See, this is the language of the new birth there in the Old Testament. This one was born, I use the spiritual sense, in Zion. “Indeed of Zion it will be said, ‘This one and that one were born in her’; and the Most High will establish her. The Lord will write in the register of the peoples, ‘This one was born in Zion.’” So the Old Testament there is looking to believers from all these different countries whose names are written in God’s book of life, in His register of the nations. Now we can talk to that man in Acts 8 and find out what his history was, but he is already a worshipper of the one true God.

The second indication in the passage that this man has a history in which God has already been at work in his heart before this occasion, is what he is reading. Just think about it. He is reading Isaiah 53 and he wants to know what it means. That is a pretty good introduction to the Gospel. If you met somebody who was reading Isaiah 53 and said, “Who was this about?” and they were asking it with an open heart, you would not be able to wait to share the Gospel. And that is, of course, exactly what Philip does on this occasion. But I want to ask the man, “Why were you reading this particular passage? Was it simply the Holy Spirit directing you to that passage and preparing your heart, or had you met somebody in Jerusalem who encouraged you to read these Messianic prophecies and think about them? Had you seen some Christians there? What is the reason behind this?” And of course we cannot answer the questions, not until we see him, that is. But my point is this. When Philip meets this man and leads him to faith, there is already a history there. God has been at work in this man’s life for hours, days, weeks, months, or years. Who knows? We will find out one day. But on this moment, Philip has the privilege of leading him to faith. And then the Holy Spirit takes Philip away supernaturally. He just goes off, because God

cares for people. That is the wonderful fact behind this story. God desires to save people, and He will take His people to those whom He is calling to Himself, even if it means doing extraordinary things to get them there. God is at work in the lives of people. So evangelism takes time.

People have asked if I think that it is helpful to have the title “pastor” in doing relational evangelism. I think I already shared the example of Britain. There, it really is not advantageous to be known to be a minister by non-Christians, because they immediately assume all sorts of things about you. They assume that you are a person who is totally weak and ineffectual, and a hypocrite, and all kinds of other things. You are a parasite living off other people, and you are likely to ask them for money. This is what they assume. And so in going out into the society, I just did not tell people I was a pastor. This is not because I was ashamed of it but it was because of the problems. I did not tell them until they had already gotten to know me and decided that I was worth knowing and had a character that they were prepared to respect. And then of course I was happy to tell them that I was a pastor. Now, in a previous session, I quoted that passage from Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus tells us not to cling to titles, like teacher and rabbi or pastor and father. He does not use the title pastor, but we might as well include that there. His whole point is about titles and what their value is to us. It is perfectly appropriate to use the title pastor or teacher. The New Testament does. Paul happily talks about himself and others as pastors, teachers, or elders. So does the apostle Peter. There are two problems with titles that we have to deal with. The first is our own hearts, and that is what Jesus is challenging us about in that passage in Matthew’s Gospel. We are not to treasure titles as if they somehow gave us a superior status and made us people who would therefore receive public honor. If we have titles, we can start treasuring the way people greet us, as professor, doctor, pastor, or teacher, and we can insist that people use those titles. “You have got show proper respect when you speak to me. Do not just call me Jerram; call me professor, or pastor.” Now, we can start thinking like that in our own hearts, and in even in what we say to people. If we are doing that, Jesus rebukes us very passionately and says, “Listen, you are all brothers. You only have one teacher, the Christ. You are not anybody’s teacher. I am.” That is what He is saying in the ultimate sense. People who come to faith and grow in faith are being taught by God. He is happy to use us in His service, but He is the primary teacher, and we need to recognize that. And if we think of the title of pastor, it is inappropriate for us to think of people in our congregations as “my” sheep. They are Christ’s sheep. He is the Great Shepherd; He is the shepherd of their souls in a way I could never be. He calls me to be a co-laborer with Him as an under-shepherd, but I need to remember that. I am an under-shepherd and under-pastor; I am not *the* pastor of people. Christ is the pastor. So, the title itself is fine. It is appropriate to give people the title elder, pastor, or teacher. The New Testament does. But first of all, I have to deal with the problem in my own heart. Do I treasure these titles because it makes me feel better than other people? And the Scripture tells me not to do that. It says it even to the king in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 17. He has got to read God’s Word himself every day after he has made a copy with his own hand, and he must not consider himself better than his brother. That is a king, and it is true for a pastor too. I am not better than anybody. I am one of Christ’s sheep myself. I need to remember that first of all. I am one of His students; I am to be taught by Him. So I do not treasure for myself titles or status. It is very, very important.

Second, I must not insist that other people use those titles. In others words, I should not feel put out if somebody fails to call me by one of my titles; I should not somehow feel put down. I should not care. Now, it is appropriate for us to treat one another with respect, and the New Testament encourages us to do that. The New Testament encourages us to cheerfully submit to our elders and to show proper respect to them. So I am happy to call my pastor “pastor.” I love to do it, and it always embarrasses him a little bit because I am a professor here. But I like to do it, because I really honor him and truly respect him. I do not do it because he insists on me calling him that, but because I love him. So it is appropriate for us to use the titles, but it is not appropriate for us to use them as if we thought of our pastor or teacher as

being the person that we are finally dependent on, because any true pastor, any true teacher, is leading people to Christ rather than to himself. And that is the other thing that is important here.