

Apologetics & Building Bridges

Heavenly Father, we want to thank You for this day. You are magnificent, Father, and we worship You. We pray that You will teach us today. Be with us, open Your Word to us, open our hearts to You we ask for Jesus' sake. Amen.

We were talking about respect in the last session, and we have been discussing examples from the book of Acts from our three basic messages in Acts 13, 14 and 17. We also looked very briefly at Paul before Agrippa and the way he speaks to King Agrippa with such respect.

We could look at many examples in the Gospels of the same thing where we see Jesus treating people with wonderful dignity. I mentioned earlier Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman recorded for us in John 4. It is a remarkable example of that. As you see Jesus meeting with the Samaritan woman by the well, there are so many things that are striking about that encounter. There are all sorts of reasons why Jesus as a Jew would have found it difficult to meet this woman and treat her with dignity and respect. First, the Jews despised the Samaritans racially because they regarded them as a mixed breed. They were seen as a mixture of Israeli blood intermarried with the people the Assyrians had transported into that area after the captivity of the northern kingdom.

Second, they hated them and despised them theologically because they saw Samaritans as heretics. They hated their religion with such passion and such zeal that in around 150 BC the Jews actually burned down the temple the Samaritans had built on Mount Gerizim. They saw it as an offense to heaven. They despised them so much that if a Jew and a Samaritan were walking down a road on a sunny day, the Jew would go into the ditch to avoid even their shadow being touched by the shadow of a Samaritan. The Jews regarded them as absolutely religiously and morally unclean before God.

Another challenge that Jesus, a Jewish teacher, faced in meeting the Samaritan woman was the problem of her gender. As I have said to you, Jewish rabbis did not teach women. They did not regard them as having sufficiently capable minds to be worthy of learning at the feet of teachers. That is why Jewish women could not be called to be a witness in a court of law and why they were not taught theology. They were simply looked down on as rationally inadequate. And along with all these challenges is the sin of this woman. She is basically a prostitute, a woman who has been passed from man to man. When a woman was divorced five times like this, it was simply assumed in those cultures that it was the woman's fault. It was a lack in her, so she is basically regarded as a sexual object. And now she is reduced to the point of living with a man who has not even dignified her with a marriage ceremony or a marriage contract. So here is a woman who is despised in all sorts of ways, both by Jews and even by people in her own culture. When you see Jesus talking to her, as you read about in John 4, it is just a wonderful example of the dignity with which Christ treats people. Jesus has a theological discussion with her. That is what is actually happening. No man would have ever treated her that way before. If you think about the reality of her sin, she is a person regarded as morally outcast, yet here is the Creator of the universe, absolutely holy and morally perfect, talking with her in this way. He was breaking Jewish law and setting aside Jewish custom by asking her for a drink. It was against Jewish law to eat or drink anything from an object touched by a Samaritan. Yet this is exactly how Jesus begins their contact, by dignifying her in this remarkable manner. It is a wonderful example to us of respect.

We find this all the way through the Gospel. Think of Jesus in Luke 19 when He meets Zaccheus, a tax collector. Jesus invites Himself to Zaccheus' house for a meal, and it astonishes everyone watching, not just the Pharisees and teachers of the law, but everyone. They wonder, "Can Jesus possibly be from God

because He has gone to be the guest of a sinner?" Jesus affirms the dignity, value, and worth of Zaccheus by inviting Himself to his home for a meal. It is the same where the prostitute comes to wash Jesus' feet with her tears, anoint them with oil, and dry them with her hair. This takes place in the home of Simon, the Pharisee, who invited Jesus to be a guest in his home. He thinks to himself as he sees this happen, "Jesus may be able to teach a few things, but He is not from God; otherwise, He would know what kind of person this woman is, and He would not allow her to touch Him." But Jesus dignifies her by receiving this gift from her. It is one of the beautiful things you see with the Gospel. Christ, the Creator of heaven and earth, the One who is absolutely holy, dignifies people by showing His vulnerability to them and receiving from them what they have to give Him. It is remarkable. Of course, God does this with all of us every day. He delights to receive the gifts we offer despite our lack of worth in terms of the reality of our sin. This is precisely what the Gospel is. The Gospel is when God comes to you to draw you to Christ, when God accepts you every day of your life when you come to Him in your need and in your sin. It is a Gospel that treats you with wonderful dignity, grace, and respect. That is the Gospel. There is no other Gospel. And this is precisely what we are called to do.

We have already looked at the passages several times where the apostles command us to treat people with respect. Peter says to respect people whenever you talk about your faith to anyone, even if they are enemies of the Gospel who criticize you. In the context of people who are criticizing believers, Peter says in 1 Peter 3:15 to give your defense, your apology, with gentleness and respect. Paul says the same in Colossians 4. We have already looked at the issue of what it is that enables us to respect people. Fundamentally, it is that they are made in the image of God.

Our calling as Christians whenever we meet anyone is that our first response, our automatic response, should be to see where each person we meet demonstrates the glory of being created in the image of God. We are to ask ourselves the question that Psalm 8 asks: "What is man"—this man, this woman, this child—"that you are mindful of him?" And our answer is, "[They are] crowned with glory and honor." They are made in God's image and our calling is to see that with every individual we ever meet. That should be your first response as you go out from here to work in churches. As you meet unbelievers around you your first impulse should be to observe where this person demonstrates the image of God. Where do they show the dignity, glory, and honor of being made by God in His likeness? Calvin has a lot to say about this in his *Institutes*, which may surprise some of you who assume that Reformed theology teaches that people are just wretched sinners and totally depraved. Reformed theology does teach total depravity; that is, that every aspect of our humanity is deeply damaged and torn apart by the Fall. But Reformed theology has also always taught that, first of all—fundamentally—people bear the image of God. That is who they are, and Calvin uses the beautiful image that human beings are like ruined statues. We see the ruin, but we also always see the outlines of their former glory of God's image indelibly imprinted upon them. That is Calvin's image and it is our calling to always see that, to see that glory of people.

Second, even when we do see their sin, it should remind us not of their worthlessness, but of our own sin. Whenever I see somebody else's sin, it ought to have the impact on me of reminding me of the far greater seriousness of my own sin because I am a person who has come to know God through Jesus Christ. I am a person who knows His commandments, who longs to love Him and serve Him; yet I serve Him so poorly, coldly, lacking in zeal, and inadequately. My sin ought to cause me far greater distress than the sin of anyone else. When I see the sin of unbelievers it ought to put a sword in my own heart because my sin is so much more serious. Not that their sin is not serious; that is not my point, but it is my sin that ought to be most serious to me. That is why Jesus challenges us to first take the beam out of our own eye. The person who has come to know Christ—the better we know Him, the closer we draw to

Him, the more fully and deeply we desire to walk in His ways, the more aware we become of our own sin.

And third, our response toward people we meet should be compassion. We should recognize their need just as I recognize my own need. The recognition of my own sin reminds me of my own need for Christ. It also enables me to look at others in their sin with grace and compassion, knowing that they need exactly what I need.

I want to add one last thing and that is regarding respect. Respect is not a technique that you can adopt like some new method of evangelism. Please do not think that is what I am talking about, that in place of some other technique I am teaching respect as an evangelism technique. Respect is not a technique. You respect people because you ought to, because God commands it, and because He has indeed created them in His image. To fail to respect them and honor them is to blaspheme against God. That is why James says what he does in James 3 about cursing people and blessing God. If you go to the grocery store and the checkout person gives you too much change, why do you give the change back? Do you do it so you can say, "I have done this because I am a Christian and here is a tract"? Or do you do it because it is right? You do it because honesty is right, good, beautiful, and it is what God commands. It is not a technique for communicating the Gospel to people. It is simply the right thing to do whether it gives you an opportunity to share the Gospel or not. Respecting people is the right thing to do and that is why we are called to it. It is part of obedience to God. It is the appropriate response to who people are. If you try to adopt respecting people as a sort of technique, they see right through it. The challenge is that we are not to despise people. Think of the Christian books about the New Age movement. Much of what you find ridicules New Age belief. Think how offensive it is to you as a Christian when you hear somebody ridiculing faith in Christ. The Gospel calls us to do unto others as we would have them do to us. We long to have the name of Christ honored and respected by other people because we know He is worthy of all honor and respect. If we long for that for ourselves, being hurt when we see unbelievers showing disrespect, dishonor, and blaspheming the name of Christ, then we certainly should not treat them in a way we do not want to be treated ourselves.

So what do I mean by building bridges? It is a very simple principle. It is not just that God calls us to respect people because they are made in His image and His nature is indelibly stamped in their being. It is that whenever we meet people we need to work on finding aspects of their thinking that we can commend and approve. We do not just need to respect people themselves. We need to work at respecting what they think by looking at their beliefs and their lives and finding things that we can honestly commend. To put it another way, what we are looking for is aspects of truth in their thinking. They are always going to be there. Look at our examples. In Acts 13 Paul is speaking to Jews and to God-fearing Gentiles in the synagogue in Antioch. We already spoke about what Paul could take for granted when he was in the synagogue. If we look at that slightly another way, what Paul is really doing is building on aspects of the thinking of these people in which he can commend. He can approve these beliefs because they have elements of truth in them. His hearers believe in the one true God who has revealed Himself to His people Israel. They are thoroughly familiar with the Old Testament and regard it as inspired. They know Israel's history. They are committed to obeying the law. They are expecting the Messiah. They know they are accountable to God. Paul's sermon is basically constructed on all of those points, and we could add others to them as I did the other day. For Paul these are contact points; these are bridges that he uses in the synagogue to communicate the message of the Gospel to these people. Paul's sermon is carefully constructed to build on what they already know. Paul begins his message in the synagogue not by attacking their disbelief, their failure to obey the law adequately, or their refusal to have already responded to the knowledge they have of Jesus. Paul begins by commending them as people who worship God. That is how he begins his message in the synagogue.

If we turn to the message in Mars Hill, we also find Paul building bridges there. Let us look at that one a little more carefully. Where does Paul begin? Despite his distress at the idolatry he finds in Athens, he begins by commending them for their religious longings, for their desire to worship. In Acts 17:22-23 he says, “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now, what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.” These people are idolaters. They worship at pagan temples. But Paul begins his message by commending them for their desire to worship and to know God. He begins by telling them “what you worship as something unknown I am going to tell you.” I want you to think about that. Imagine yourself saying the same thing to somebody who is involved in the New Age movement, commending their desire to worship, telling them that the god they worship in ignorance you are going to reveal to them more fully. That is what Paul does here in Athens. He is asking the question, “What can I commend?” rather than beginning by saying, “Where shall I attack them? What is wrong with their thinking?” No, Paul takes the opposite approach, not seeking to find where they are wrong, but rather what he can build on. The bridges are obvious here. He builds on their need to know God, their need to worship, their understanding that God is greater than human persons, and their sense of the dignity of human beings—that there is something special about us as the offspring of God. These are the things on which Paul builds in the synagogue.

Sometimes people raise an objection to what I am saying by saying that there is nothing common. They say there is no common ground between believers and unbelievers; therefore, this is an impossible task to build bridges. Imagine two circles. One contains the words “Christian Belief” or “A Christian Worldview,” and another that says, “Non-Christian Belief” or “Non-Christian Worldview.” Very often people talking about apologetics and how we can communicate to unbelievers will say, “There is no common ground between believers and unbelievers, so there is nothing on which we can build in the thinking of non-Christians. These two people inhabit totally different worlds shaped by the commitment of the heart and their unbelief, so our task can simply be to proclaim the Gospel. We cannot build on anything in the thinking of the unbeliever.” If this were an accurate picture of the way things are, then I would agree with that statement. If it were true that we inhabit different universes, it would be appropriate to say, “There is nothing whatsoever in the thinking or life of the unbeliever on which I can build.” But that is not the situation in which anyone exists. The truth is that every human being we are ever going to meet is living between two worlds, and there is always an overlap.

First, every person we are ever going to meet is living in God’s universe. Whether they believe in God or not, acknowledge Him or not, or worship Christ or not, there is nowhere else they can exist but in the world that God has made. They are constantly restrained by that reality. They may invent out of the idolatry an unbelief of their heart, an alternative universe. They may have a New Age, Islamic, Marxist, secularist, or postmodern view of the world. They may engage in practical idolatry, worshipping their own body, money, or sex, but that is not the universe in which they actually live. They are constrained by the reality of God’s world. That is always common to whoever they are or whatever they say they believe.

The second thing that is always in common is they are made in the image of God, and they are constrained by that reality whether they acknowledge that or not. They may think that they are an ape with clothes on. They may think their body and everything else is just an accidental coming together. As Bertrand Russell, the atheist, expressed it, we are accidental collections of atoms. That is the whole universe and that is us, too. They may think that. They may proclaim a New Age view that they are one with God, that they are part of an extension of God throughout the universe. But whatever they say they

believe and however they may describe their worldview, they are constrained by the reality that they are made in God's likeness. Let me use an illustration.

We have a couple visiting with us right now from England, very dear friends of ours. The husband works as an industrial psychologist; that is, he goes around to businesses helping them treat their colleagues and employees better. He was telling me of the dramatic change that had taken place in business practice over the last few years. He said businesses can approach the question of their profitability in two ways. One, they could approach it by trying to get every ounce of energy they can out of their workers. They could press forward ruthlessly in this competitive marketplace and motivate people by fear, reward, and all sorts of other things. That would improve their bottom line. With the threat of firing and replacement, salary cuts, and other things, they could get everything out of their employees they wanted. My friend said that works for a while, but then after a year the whole thing gets screwed up, and it starts getting diminishing returns. People leave. They cannot cope with the pressure. They actually start producing less. The other approach you can take is to actually start treating people well, treating them as responsible people. He said there has been a whole series of books written about values for business today with names like *Servant Leadership* and about treating people with dignity in the workplace. These books talk about encouraging the workers' gifts, encouraging them to exercise responsibility, and delegating authority and responsibility. Some of the books even talk about forgiveness when somebody makes a mistake, not destroying them publicly in front of other people. He said as a Christian, it is fascinating for him to see this. He can say to them, God's Word said this thousands of years ago; this is the way we should treat each other. Christians have always known this when they have been faithful to God's Word. The businesses come to discover it purely pragmatically. It works. You treat people like this and the business flourishes. There are more and more businesses affected by this approach. That is an example of what I am saying here.

People are constrained by the way God has created the universe and by the moral structures of reality. They are constrained by the fact that people are made in God's image. And if you treat them that way, it is fruitful. A Christian should never be surprised by this. It gives you wonderful things to talk about, that treating people well works for a reason. It works because this is the way God made the universe and the way He has made people. As an industrial psychologist who is highly regarded and who has traveled all over Europe helping businesses, it gives my friend all sorts of opportunities to share his Christian faith. There is a reason why this works. It is not just accidental happenstance that these things improve your bottom line and make your working conditions happier for everybody so that you have fulfilled, useful, and fruitful employees in your company. There are endless examples like this.

Several years ago the University of Chicago did a survey of human sexuality. It was the most in depth study of human sexuality that has ever been done. As they reported the findings of this research on human sexuality, they were astonished by the findings. The findings said people who stay together faithfully in their marriages are actually more sexually fulfilled than people who commit adultery, sleep around, or have multiple sexual partners. Reporters and commentators were astonished that people who are faithful to one person for life are more sexually fulfilled. How bizarre! Who would have thought it? However, a Christian's response is that this is not bizarre at all. Why should we be surprised that human sexuality is related to the rest of our humanity, to kindness, respect, trustworthiness, loyalty, and faithfulness? This is the way God created us. The other thing they found particularly funny was that people who were faithfully married actually had more sex. Supposedly these high-flying singles out there are rushing around having all these sexual partners, but that is not actually the reality. Again, who should be surprised that people who love each other faithfully have, not just a richer, but a more frequent sexual experience? That is what I am talking about. People are constrained by the way God created the universe and by the way He is created us. Because of that, there are always going to be elements in

people's thinking where we can say there is truth, and there is something that we can approve. Our task is to always ask the question, "What is right about people's thinking? What bridges can I build?"

Before we go on to our third principle, let me give some further examples from today as we think about communicating to people and finding things that we may approve. First of all, what about the way He has created our Church-going people today? Suppose we are talking to somebody who is not a Christian but who is basically or vaguely church-ed.

Now, it is really difficult actually what proportions of Americans are church-ed and the reason for that is that there are different surveys. Some surveys will say as many as 45% or 50% of the population go regularly to church. Others will put the number as low as 30%, so that is a huge difference. What accounts for the difference is people always present themselves as being more faithful at church attendance than they are, and that is fascinating. So if you word the question to say, "Do you go to church regularly or once a month?" people who go once or twice a year at Christmas and Easter will respond that they go once a month. If you have got somebody who maybe goes once a month, they will tell you in answer to surveys that they go regularly every week. People are not being purposely dishonest. We all like to think better about ourselves than we are. It is the same if you ask questions about morality. The overwhelming majority of Americans will respond to such questions by claiming that they basically obey the second half of The Ten Commandments. But if you ask the same person about other people, basically they will say most other people—80% of other people—do not obey the second half of The Ten Commandments. People have a very different perception of themselves than they do of other people, especially when it comes to religious and moral activity.

Now, in Europe, you would not get quite the same response in most places, not because Europeans are more truthful about such things—they are not more truthful in any way—but because in England, and even France, for example, going to church is not part of people's life anymore. It is not even considered socially important at all. So if you ask people there whether they go to church, they will say no. In America it is still very much a part of the way of life of a significant part of the population and part of their memory, so people think this is a measure somehow of their virtue and that is why they will respond in this way. However, in most European countries they do not think that anymore. It is not that they are more truthful by nature; they are not, but it is still considered something important to many Americans even if it does not have that much importance in their own lives any longer.

What are some of the bridges? Number one, do they believe in God? Almost all of them will say they do. The vast majority, 90% of Americans, believe in God. Their views of God may not be very clear, and they certainly will not be fully biblical. Notice that when Paul was speaking to people in the synagogue, their views were not fully biblical either. The people in the synagogue did not believe in the Trinity. They did not acknowledge that Jesus was God. And yet, Paul is able to build on their worship of the God of Israel. We should reflect on the issue of whether this person believes in God. The majority of church-goers in our society have a deistic view of God rather than a biblical one. They have the view of deism; that is, that God is rather distant. He created the world and wound it up like a clock and just left it there, not interacting with it. But they do have some belief in God though it will not be as biblical a belief as the people in that synagogue. Still, it is something on which you can build.

Second, do they have respect for the Bible? The overwhelming majority of church-goers will say they respect the Bible though they may not read it. In fact, most of them do not. We live in a society where biblical literacy is declining dramatically. It is true even of our seminary students. Gradually over the years students have been doing worse and worse on our entry test on biblical knowledge. That is part of the culture in which we live. Even where the Bible is respected, it is not read a great deal in many of our

churches. I preach in many kinds of churches, and even in most worship services God's Word is hardly read at all publicly. Often when I preach somewhere, the only passage of Scripture that is read is the one that I read that I am preaching on. There is almost no public reading of the Scripture in vast numbers of churches in many different denominations, including evangelical ones, never mind ones that are theologically liberal. So do people have some respect for the Bible? That is something on which you can build.

Third, do they have some sense of needing to live in obedience to God's law? Church-goers especially are going to say they recognize their call to obey the commandments of God, though they will also be deeply shaped by the moral relativism of our culture. While they say they are committed to obeying God's laws, in practice many of them will have been unfaithful in their marriages, aborted babies, and disobeyed the commandments of God in all sorts of other areas. But again, it is something on which they can build. They have some sense of obligation to God's commandments.

Fourth, is Christ someone whom they know about and whom they admire? They will say they do, even those who go to churches that are actually cults in the technical definition of that term. They strongly reject some of the most central doctrines of orthodox Christian faith, for example the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, or Christian Scientists. But if people are church-ed, do they respect Christ? Do they honor Him in some way? They do. A majority of their views may be very inadequate. Television programs that come out with a view that Jesus was simply a man are very influential on many church-ed people, but they will have some respect for the person of Christ on which you can build.

Fifth, do they acknowledge an afterlife? Almost all people who are church-ed do. What you need to recognize, though, is that people's views of the afterlife are dramatically changing. Thirty years ago maybe just 1% of the American population would have spoken about reincarnation if you spoke about the afterlife. Today, as many as 25% to 30% will confuse Christian views of the afterlife with ideas of reincarnation, simply because New Age ideas are so popular. They are so widespread and get presented in all sorts of casual contacts as well as through people formally teaching them. People are going to come across it in movies and television shows. But they will have some sense of the afterlife. Again, it is a bridge on which you can build.

Sixth, do they recognize that there is some possibility of judgment after death? People have a much less clear idea today, even church-ed people, than those in the synagogue in the first century would have had of judgment. You will find that the majority of church-ed people who do not understand the Gospel will assume that if they have been basically decent people, they are going to heaven. They think that God will receive them and it would be unkind of Him not to. That is where most people are. They have some sense that there will be a judgment, but they think that the rejection part of it is only going to be for rapists, murderers, and other people who have done really nasty things. You have got some bridges on which you can build, though they are much more tenuous than Paul could build upon in the synagogue. They are still there. There are points where you can commend people.

If we look at a second group of people, what about people who are involved in what we might call the New Spirituality or New Age Spirituality? What if the person who we are meeting, talking to, getting to know, or whose book we are reading is basically within the New Spirituality—they are somewhat New Age? This probably covers about a quarter of the population out there. Some of you have told me you have members of your family who are getting more and more involved in New Age thinking all the time. About a quarter of the American population now describe themselves as interested in the New Spirituality or New Age Spirituality. What are some of the bridges on which you can build?

First, do they sense a need to worship? They will have some sense of worship, that there is some sort of divine reality. They may not define that as being a god or the God, but there is some sort of divine reality that they think exists and that they are called to worship in some way.

Second, is there a belief that spirituality is important? That is one of the things that you will always find with people who are interested in the New Age. They are deeply interested in spirituality, and many of them are people who have looked around at the culture and say materialism is not sufficient. There has to be more to life than making money and having things. They are spiritually hungry and searching, so that is a bridge on which you can build. It may be leading them in some wrong directions at the moment. But like Paul in Athens, you are going to recognize that spiritual concern is something that is significant to them. They are right when they say materialism is inadequate. It does not satisfy the human heart. Just making more money and getting more things is nothing on which to build your life.

We may put that as a third point here. Do they see that materialism is inadequate to satisfy the heart's longings? Often New Age people happen to be a sort of interesting mixture. They are trying to have all the toys of the world and at the same time be spiritual, too. New Age Spirituality is big business right now. It makes enormous amounts of money. But before we mock people for that, we need to recognize there are a lot of people in our churches—and all of us struggle with the same thing—who try to worship God and mammon even though Jesus says that is impossible. Secretly we think we know better. It is quite possible for me to desire to be rich and have everything I like as well as worship Christ though He said you cannot do that. You cannot serve two gods at once.

Fourth, are they searching for inner peace? The heart of the New Age movement is this longing for peace. Scripture says that God has put eternity into people's hearts. People have a longing to have some sense of peace because they recognize that things are not quite right with the world and with them. They want to set it right, but they are going about it the wrong way. New Age Spirituality does not identify the problem we have as sin. It identifies the problem as one of knowledge, that we have forgotten who we are. It says we are actually divine, and if we would just remember we are divine and wake up, then it would be okay and we would find inner peace. So its answer is very different from a biblical answer, and its answer is wrong. But the longing for inner peace is itself appropriate and is something on which we can build.

Fifth, have they given up on the church for the satisfaction of their spiritual needs? Probably the majority of people who are attracted to New Age Spirituality are people who have found the Christian church inadequate. The majority of people who are into New Age Spirituality think they have tried Christianity. They may have gone to some liberal theological church where the Gospel was lost a generation or two ago, so there was not anything there to satisfy the longings of the heart. Or they have gone to a really nominal high church, a sacramentalist church like the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, or some of the higher Episcopal churches. Some of these churches have ritual without biblical doctrine, teaching, and life. I am not saying that is the way all sacramentalist churches are. You can find the Gospel all over the place. But many people in the New Age movement are people who come from Catholic, Orthodox, and Episcopal churches and have found "Christianity" inadequate. There are also many people attracted to New Age thinking who have come from legalistic fundamentalist churches who have been turned off. They think they have tried Christianity, and they have quite rightly found it wanting. When you speak to somebody who is in the New Age movement and who has a church background, you need to listen really carefully. You need to listen sympathetically because often they are criticizing things that deserve to be criticized. If they have been in the church, for example, where there has been a terrible abuse of power by the pastor, and that is what they have reacted against, you must never try to explain it away. You must never try to excuse it or pretend that it does not matter.

God's Word is absolutely straight about the failures of those who claim His name. Jesus' hardest criticisms are for the Pharisees who have misrepresented His truth and turned people away. When people come to you and say, "I went to this church and it was basically dead," you need to listen attentively and say, "Well, I am sorry; that is not the way true Christianity is." You need to listen, sympathize, and understand, and you must not excuse things that cannot be excused. This is not because you hate the church or because you hate your fellow believers. That is not the point. It is a matter of honesty. Where a church has not taught God's Word or there has been real failure, abuse of power, legalism instead of God's law taught, nominalism, or empty ritual, you need to recognize that it happened. When people react against that they are right in doing so.

Sixth, are they concerned for the protection of the environment? Christians can sometimes dismiss New Age people as being "tree huggers" or other abusive terms like that. That is not appropriate. As Christians, we know that God made this universe absolutely wonderfully. We ought to know that better than anybody else. The Christian always ought to be the first person to say this created universe is God's gift to us that He calls us to be stewards of. That is what Adam and Eve were called to do. They were called to rule to the glory of God, not to abuse it. There are a lot of laws in the Old Testament about not abusing the environment. God cares for things. He made the earth. When you hear New Age people talking about the importance of the environment, of protecting it for future generations, you should be prepared to say amen. Of course it matters. The people of Israel were told they did not own the land. It belonged to God, and they were given it in trust for future generations. They could not do with it anything they wanted to. They had to pass it on. They were called to care for it, and we need to take that seriously. If you have somebody in the New Age movement who cares about the environment, you need to realize that is good. That is something on which you can build.

In summary, you are not going to begin by asking where the thinking of this person is foolish: "Where can I just tear this apart because it is grossly inadequate and dishonoring to God and to the Gospel?" Like Paul, you are going to start by saying, "What can I build on? Where are there elements of truth?" The truth may be distorted. It may be covered over with all kinds of stuff that is wrong. However, look for where there are elements of truth on which you can build. Their idolatry, unbelief, and blasphemy may distress you deeply like it distressed Paul in Athens, but you are going to ask, "What can I build on? What is good here?"