

Apologetics & Communication

Heavenly Father, we look forward to the regeneration of all things when Christ comes back and the whole of this world blossoms like a rose like the glory of spring. And Father, it gives us the hope, too, of the newness of life that You have promised to us. This is both when we stand before You when we will be made completely new and now day by day as, by the power of your Spirit, You bring to our lives the first fruits of the resurrection. Father, we thank You for the glory of the Gospel and wonder of its truth. You have committed Yourself to making us new in every way. We pray, Father, that in our studies together that You will renew our understanding and shape our thinking according to Your Word. We pray that You will renew our hearts so that we might have the attitude of Christ and be prepared to live as those who are servants of people around us. Do this work in us, we pray. Renew us by Your Spirit and by Your Word and by the example of Your Son. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

In previous sessions we have been talking about what others believe. We talked about how important your respect for another person is, that you treat them as a person whom you care for and respect, and that you affirm who they are as an individual. You should recount back to the person what you understand about what they believe, what shapes their life, who they are, and what is precious and important to them.

Let us say, for example, you are talking to a member of your family or a friend who has gotten involved in New Age Spirituality. You should recount back to that person what you have come to understand of their beliefs, what they think is important about life, who they think they are, who they think God is, and what spirituality means to them. But you should be able to do this in a way that they will recognize themselves gladly. It is not to be a caricature of what somebody else thinks. Remember how much we dislike it when people misrepresent what we believe as Christians. We long for faith in Christ to be treated with some respect and justice. It is important that you learn to understand people's views well enough so you can say them back to them in a way that they recognize themselves gladly and say, "Yes, this is me." In fact, hopefully, if you do it well enough, they may even understand what is important to them better after you have recounted it to them than they understood before. People actually often do not understand themselves very well. You should create a portrait of this person and of what is important to them that they can gladly recognize rather than feeling, "No, that is a gross misrepresentation of what I think." That is a terrible turnoff.

We also talked about establishing bridges, areas where you can gladly affirm and acknowledge something that is good. Find things that are right, honorable, true, and that you can build on as a Christian. Those are areas that I have called a person's sacred corner. Everyone has a sacred corner. It is an area in their lives where they are actually holding on to elements of God's truth. They are holding on to them in unrighteousness, so they have no place in their worldview. They may not fit with their understanding of reality—for example, my father's passionate moral convictions, which had no place in his Marxism. Everyone has that sacred corner where they are still in touch with the reality of the way God has made the world and the way He has made them. They are in touch with things that are true, good, and noble.

You need to take those bridging points and clarify what the truth is. Paul begins with the Stoics' worship of the unknown god and their vague pantheistic notions of God. He builds from that a declaration of who God truly is. That is the heart of his message in Athens. He starts with the bridge and then tells them who God truly is, saying in Acts 17: 23, "What you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you." That is his whole message. This is who God truly is: the Creator, the God who has

made us in His likeness, the Judge, the One who rules history and so on. Paul declares the truth about God. You should be building on your bridge to declare and clarify what biblical truth is. At the end of your conversations you should challenge them in some way like Paul challenges the Athenians on their idolatry. Your temptation when you get to clarifying what the truth is will be to recount the whole good news of the Gospel and revert to biblical language at that point. Do not. You only want to clarify those elements of the truth that are appropriate, that the person needs to be addressed with right now, and where they need to be challenged. Remember, we talked about Jesus with the expert in the law, the man who asks how to inherit eternal life. Jesus does not tell him the whole Gospel. What He tells him is what he needs to know at that moment. That is, He tells him what it truly means to love your neighbor as yourself and how he is miserably failing to do that. That is the area where he is challenged so that he will return another day to hear the good news about Christ. He needs to hear the good news about what God's law truly means and then the impact that has on his life. You should declare the aspect of God's truth that is appropriate for where this person is in your conversations with them and challenge them there. There are many different aspects for the good news of the Gospel in addition to Christ's death and our call to repent and have faith in Him.

Everybody you are ever going to meet is a multi-faceted person. People cannot be reduced to a couple of things any more than you would want somebody to reduce you to just a couple of beliefs. Where you take your conversation is a matter of your discernment under the direction of the Holy Spirit. As you pray about your relationship with the individual, know what the most appropriate things on which to build are, where your bridges are, and what the appropriate things to clarify and challenge are. As you think about your own life in relationship to the Lord, Christ is clarifying your thinking every day of your life. He is challenging you in another area of your life as each day goes by. And He is very patient and forbearing. He did not come to you when you were first converted and unload everything on you at once, all the areas where your thinking and your life needed to change and grow. He is extraordinarily patient because He sees each one of us exactly as we are in all our desperate sin, unbelief, and confused and ignorant thinking. But He is gracious, patient, long-suffering, and forbearing. Every one of us enjoys that reality every day of our lives. We have to learn to be that way with unbelievers, rather than just unloading on them. We need to learn to be discerning. That is the beauty of looking at the examples of Jesus in the Gospels.

We finished the last session by talking about the importance of asking questions of people so that when we speak to them we may say something appropriate. Whenever I meet with somebody, whether the person is a believer or an unbeliever, I always pray for discernment that the Holy Spirit who sees this person's heart and mind so much more clearly than I do will help me to understand what issues need to be addressed. At the same time, God calls me to seek to get to know people. I am going to ask questions so that I can understand better where the person is coming from and try to say something that will be appropriate. It is like an apple of gold in a setting of silver. It is what you are going to spend your life doing, those of you who are going to be pastors or involved in any kind of ministry where you are seeking to help people one on one. If you enter a pastoral visit or a counseling situation having decided ahead of time exactly what you are going to say regardless of the person you are going to talk to, you are not going to be much help as a pastor to anyone. Nobody will come to you with their problems because they do not expect to be heard and taken seriously. It is the same in talking with unbelievers. We must be prepared to commit ourselves to genuinely understanding the thinking of people and what is going on in their hearts. That is what you see in Jesus' encounters with people as He asks His questions. He is really seeking to understand and to help the person understand what the devotions of their heart are. Then He speaks to them, challenges them, and pushes them a step further. That is really what you are doing; you are building a bridge and then pushing somebody a step further. You see this constantly in Jesus' conversations; He is pushing somebody one step further down the road toward faith in Himself.

That is our calling, to be seeking with God's help to move people along that road. Pray for discernment and learn to exercise patience. If you unload on somebody in one conversation everything you think they need to hear, it is probably the last time they will ever come and talk to you.

If the person already has some biblical knowledge, please do not, for your own sake as well as for theirs, use biblical language. Many of you will interact with people who have some kind of church background and who even think of themselves as Christians. But if you know them well, you know that they are probably simply nominal—that there is no genuine faith there. They have simply a cultural Christianity. With a person like that who thinks they understand what Christianity is, it will be extremely helpful to them to use different words so they are not going to respond by saying, "I already know this stuff," because the reality is that they do not. Remember what Jesus says about why He teaches in parables rather than just speaking the truth straight in the ways they were accustomed to hearing it? In Mark 4:12 He says they are always hearing yet never understanding. That is why he spoke in parables. He wanted to break through that.

To give an example I have used before, C. S. Lewis, in his introduction to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, says that he wrote these stories, first, because he loves stories and works of the imagination. But second, he wrote the stories because he knew that people were so accustomed to hearing the Christian story that they no longer hear it at all. So he tells the story of Christ under the guise of a lion, the creator of this new universe. He does it in order to break through that familiarity, which leads to real ignorance. I would urge you, whoever you are talking to, to use language that will break through either the barrier of ignorance for those who know nothing about it or the barrier of familiarity, which is an equal barrier for many people. We all know the challenge of that ourselves. For example, if we pray a prayer that we are thoroughly familiar with, like the Lord's Prayer or the Apostle's Creed, we can suddenly think, "What did I say?" We are so accustomed to saying it we can say it without thinking about its meaning. So, please use language that is not immediately identifiably Christian, which is not our specific terminology. Do not use language like "redemption," etc.

Everything you say to this person has got to be biblical. In our previous example Paul does not use Old Testament language at all, though everything he says could be preached from the early chapters of Genesis, sections of Job, and some of the Psalms. There are many parts of Scripture from which you could preach the message Paul gives in Acts 17. You could preach it from the section on idolatry in Isaiah 40-49, but you do not have to use biblical language to preach a biblical message.

In our last session we were talking about understanding what others believe. If we look at the Gospels, Jesus is a wonderful example of this because you see Him with this deep understanding of each individual to whom He goes. Jesus has done His homework. It is not simply that He is God and knows everything, but He is truly a man who has really worked at understanding the people around Him so that He can communicate with them effectively.

This brings us to principle number four, the principle of using the right language. What language am I to use when I talk about God and about the truth that He has made known in Jesus Christ? We will begin with the example of the apostle Paul. In the synagogue we find Paul using language with which his hearers are thoroughly familiar. His message in the synagogue uses the same language as any Sabbath message would have used. In Acts 13, not only the details of the content, but almost every word that Paul uses in his message in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, was taken straight from the Greek translation of the Old Testament. His language is thoroughly biblical in that account. His listeners would have been familiar with every expression he used. His language is typical of what they are accustomed to hearing. However, when you turn to Acts 17 and to the account of his message in Athens, it is

completely different. Much of this information is taken from F. F. Bruce's commentary called *The Acts of the Apostles*. The one I am referring to, which is a commentary on the Greek text, is published by Eerdmans. It has a very detailed account of the language that Paul uses as he speaks to the Athenians. I would encourage you to look at that. Paul is using the language of the Greeks, and not simply in the sense that he is speaking Greek to them. He had spoken Greek in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, but the Greek that he is using in Athens is not the Greek of the Old Testament translation. It is not the Greek of biblical Judaism. We will look at several examples of this.

When Paul speaks about God in this passage in Acts 17, he begins by using his hearers' expressions for "God" rather than those of the synagogue. He starts using a neuter expression to speak about God, "the Divine," and the same is true in Acts 17:29. It is not a word that expresses the personal God who has made Himself known in His Word. Instead Paul is prepared to use the term "the Divine." Beginning with that language, he then proclaims who God truly is as a personal being, the Creator, Sustainer, and Judge. He is prepared to use expressions that they, especially Stoics, would have been familiar with. They spoke about God as "the Divine," meaning a divine essence in a pantheistic sense. Their views were basically pantheistic, so Paul starts by using that language. You will notice as he reads this message that he does not use the name Jesus, nor does he use the term Christ. The Greek translation of the Old Testament Messiah, "the anointed one," would not have meant much to them, so he does not use that expression. In Acts 17:31 when he refers to Jesus, he refers to "a man God appointed." It is interesting to note that he uses a different expression for "man." He uses the word *aner*, the ordinary term for "man," rather than the way you see Jesus constantly referring to Himself in the Gospels, that is, "the Son of Man", *uios tou anthropou*. That term would have meant nothing to pagan hearers. It required a knowledge of the Old Testament. Jesus uses the term, "Son of Man," as His favorite self-designation in the Gospels some 80 times. He uses it far more than He calls Himself anything else. It is used in Daniel 7. That is where Jesus is taking it from. Daniel 7:13-14 says, "One like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. [...] He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him." That is Jesus' favorite way to describe Himself. Paul does not use that speaking to these Greeks. He uses the ordinary term, "man," *aner*.

We should also notice that if you were to read this in Greek, you would see that it is full of alliteration. The style of it is elevated. It is more rhetorical. Paul uses a lot of alliteration, that is, repetition of consonants especially the consonant "P" (*pi*) many times. There is a lot of repetition. There is the use of assonants, that is, vowel sounds that are echoing each other. It is quite a different kind of speech that Paul is giving here in terms of the kind of language he is using. In summary, we may simply say he is using a style of elevated language that is exactly appropriate for the context in which he is speaking. The Areopagus is the final Court of Appeal in Athens for all sorts of criminal cases and civil cases. The people are the body that appoints lecturers for the Areopagus. They meet there as a group of thinkers who are appointed to, in one sense, rule all sorts of issues for the city. They judge on religious and philosophical questions. That is the context in which Paul is speaking, so his speech is very carefully prepared in terms of every word that he uses. It is very carefully put together just like if you prepare your sermons carefully. You think about what you are going to say. You do not read a manuscript except when you start, but you think very carefully about every word you are going to use. Paul has done that here not just in the sense that he has thought carefully, but he has adapted his language to this particular setting. Elevated, poetic speech is found throughout his message. There are even local idioms used here that are appropriate in this context. With this expression "the Divine," he is using language that is ringing bells in the minds of his listeners who are Stoics and Epicureans. Hopefully you if you are talking to a friend who is a Muslim, you are going to be prepared to use language that is going to ring bells in their mind. Or if you are talking to somebody who is into New Age Spirituality, you are going to be sufficiently familiar with their language and use language that they will relate to. This is, of course,

the task that every Christian has to do if you go to another culture. You have to learn the language. You have to translate the biblical message into that language. There are many examples of this adaptation of language in the New Testament.

The next point is “The Trial Scenes.” If you read the three trial scenes in Acts 22, 24, and 26, you will see Paul constantly using the language of the courtroom. For example, turn to Acts 26 where Paul starts, “King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews.” There, immediately, you have got trial language: “defense,” “accusations.” And you will find this all the way through these three court scenes. Paul is adapting his language to what is appropriate in a courtroom. If you get taken to court, you will have a lawyer who will do exactly that and you yourself will have to do it if you speak in your own defense. You have got to use language that is appropriate in the context, and that is what Paul is doing here.

There are some examples of other adaptations of language all the way through the New Testament. Matthew’s Gospel in particular is almost certainly written in a predominantly Jewish context, and it is constantly referring to the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. *Basileia tou theou*, the kingdom of God, is one of the most common expressions in Matthew’s Gospel. Now, to understand that expression, “the kingdom of God” or “the kingdom of heaven,” you have to be thoroughly familiar with the Old Testament. There are Psalms that speak at length about God’s kingdom, that God’s kingdom rules overall, God is King of the Ages, and many expressions like this. That language simply would not have been understood by a Gentile audience unfamiliar with the Scriptures. If you read through Paul’s letters carefully, you will find that expression almost disappears. The content of what is being said does not disappear, but different language is used to communicate in a Gentile context. It is not that Paul and the other apostles think that the kingdom of God is no longer an important doctrine, but they use different language to express that. You will see that is true in John’s Gospel as well if you read it carefully. “The kingdom of God” is replaced almost entirely with language of “eternal life.” There are many examples of this in the New Testament.

Let me give one other very obvious example, which you may not have thought about. In the Old Testament there are three primary word groups used to refer to God. There is *El* and *Elohim*, God as the Mighty One. There is *Adonai*, God as Lord. And there is *Yahweh* as God reveals Himself to Moses, I AM who I AM. The term probably means something like “the God who is.” “I AM who I AM has sent me to you.” *Yahweh* is God’s personal name. That is His own name. It is the name He gives Himself as the God who has made His covenant with His people. He is the God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, who will always be faithful to His promises. That is God’s personal and special name. You should know as you read the NIV or any other English Bible that usually they will put four capital letters, L-O-R-D, to translate *Yahweh*. Whenever you see those four capitals, you know that is what is there in the Hebrew. If you see capital L and then a small o-r-d, then it is *Adonai* in the Hebrew.

Let us look at one example of this. A famous example, which is one that Jesus Himself quotes in one of His discussions with people, is Psalm 110: “The LORD says to my Lord.” Now, as you read your English Bible and see Psalm 110:1, you know immediately which words are used in the Hebrew. The first LORD is *Yahweh*, God’s personal name. The second is *Adonai*. Both of those terms are used frequently for God in the Old Testament. If you think about it, the term *El* or *Elohim*, God, the Mighty One, the Great One, could be used of any of the other gods worshipped by the people around Israel. It could be used of Baal or of Moloch. The term *Adonai* could be used of any of the other gods. Baal could be called Baal *Adonai*, Lord Baal. But *Yahweh* is only used of God Himself because it is His personal name. That is the Hebrew.

When you come to the New Testament, the apostles have a challenge. What are they going to do as they translate the different names of God into Greek? There are two terms available for them in Greek. One is the term *theos* and the other is the term *kurios*, God and Lord. There is no equivalent to Yahweh, no equivalent at all to God's personal name. So what do they do? They do not transliterate into Greek and come up with a new word. They do not seek to translate it with some equivalent expression and refer to the covenant-keeping God all the time as the great I AM. That expression is used, but it does not become a predominant name for God in the New Testament. They satisfy themselves with these two terms. Again, the word *theos*, God, in Greek could be used for any god. It could be used of Zeus. It could be used of Hermes. It could be used of any of the gods the Greeks worshipped. And the word *kurios*, Lord, could be used of Zeus or any of the other gods, but it also could be used of the emperor. For someone in human authority, a king, it could be used to mean "sir," a term of respect and honor. You find it used that way in the New Testament. You might say there is a problem there because neither of these terms communicates automatically what Christians believe about God. It does not communicate that He is the only God and Lord, that there are no other gods or lords. Both the terms are inadequate. How do the apostles deal with that? Instead of making up new words, they are content to use the language that is there. Instead of making "Hebrewisms" in Greek—though there are some examples of that—they basically use the language that is there. How do they do that?

How do they deal with the inadequacies of Greek? They do it by clarifying. Think of the book of Revelation where it speaks of Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords. Or Paul in Corinthians says there are many gods and many lords, but for us there is only one God and one Lord. He says Jesus has been given the name that is above every name in heaven and on earth or under the earth. In other words, He is the One who is the ruler of all authorities, powers, principalities, and any name that can be given in this age or in the age to come. Paul and the other apostles are constantly clarifying the language. I am not saying he is implying that in calling Jesus "God" or "Lord" He is equivalent to these other gods that everyone is worshipping around. He is the one that has the name above every name. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him and He rules over all. He is the pantocrator; He is the one who rules over everything. The New Testament is filled with this careful use of language. They are happy to use the terms that are available in Greek, but they constantly clarify them and define them. Notice they use the language of the people to whom they are going. Look at some of these other examples, language with which we have become very familiar. The terms *huiiothesia*—"adoption," *apolutrosis*—"redemption," *zoe aionios*—"eternal life," *aphtharsia*—"immortality," and *soteria*—"salvation," are not Old Testament terms. These terms have been taken from the religious climate of the first century Greek and Roman culture. The apostles use them to communicate the truth about Christ. This is true about many of the words; *mysterion*—"mystery," which Paul uses, is taken straight from the mystery religions. He uses it with a very different meaning. What the apostles did would be like if you were to get to know really well what New Age Spirituality teaches, and then you were to take that language and use it to communicate the Gospel of Christ. It may sound alarming to some of you, but that is exactly what the apostles have done, but they define it very carefully.

There is a fascinating example here. Look at *initiat epoptes*, which comes from 2 Peter 1:16. It is a word that appears just once in the New Testament. Second Peter 1:16-18 reads, "We did not follow cleverly invented stories [myths] when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well-pleased.' We ourselves heard the voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain." Peter is talking about the transfiguration, but the language he uses is taken from the language of the mystery religions, which were very similar to New Age religions of today. He took their language,

the term *epoptes*, which is translated “eyewitnesses.” *Initiats* is a technical term of the mystery religions to describe the person who is initiated into the Mystery religion.

Michael Green, in his book, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, gives several examples of initiation ceremonies. For example, in one ceremony they *initiat* into the Mystery because these were secret societies. In this example you went to an initiation ceremony and a person stands under a grill, a bull’s throat is cut over them, they are drenched with blood, and they come out saying, “I have been born again to eternal life.” “I have been made immortal.” That is an initiation ceremony from the Mystery religion; it is very similar to the New Age movement in many ways. What Peter has done is adapt that kind of language. Paul is doing it constantly, but he is very careful as he uses the language to make a radical contrast between Christian truth and the ideas of the Mystery religion. The Mystery religions are based on myths, cunningly devised stories. Nobody even thought of them as true. They are stories about the gods. They are myths.

Peter is recounting this appearance of Christ, which is an extraordinary thing. It is one of the most dramatic events in the Gospels where Christ is completely transfigured in front of His disciples. He appears in His glory, absolutely radiant, as He will be at His second coming. Moses and Elijah appear with Him, and the apostles who are present are overwhelmed. This sounds like one of the stories of the Mysteries, but Peter says very carefully, “We did not make known to you myths when we were *initiat*s into His Majesty.” At the end, he says that they actually heard this voice themselves, and they were present. This is an historical event. They saw it. Much of the language he uses here, not just the term “eyewitnesses”—*epoptes*, but also this other language about majesty, honor, glory, and the Majestic Glory would have been familiar with any of these pagans. Peter is using them to communicate the truth about Christ while at the same time very carefully distinguishing the Christian message from what other religions have to say. It is the same with terms like “wisdom” and “knowledge,” *gnosis* and *sofia*, very common terms in the Mystery religions meaning secret knowledge, secret wisdom. The apostles make it clear that it is not like that at all. This is something that God has made clearly known. It is not done in a corner. There are people who can testify to these things having taken place. These are things that can be clearly known.

Look at the last few examples: *paideia*—“training,” *eusebeo*—“piety,” *sophrosune*—“decency,” and *semnos*—“serious.” That language is taken from the Pastoral Epistles 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. Some of you may have noticed this as you were reading them in English that in English the language of the Pastorals is very different from Paul’s other letters. That has led almost all liberal scholars to deny the authority of the Bible and say these letters were written two generations later by somebody who was not an apostle at all. That is nonsense. There is no evidence for that whatsoever. Paul is simply a creative writer. He is using Stoic language. The language of “decency,” “training,” “seriousness,” “temperance,” and the others that you find in Timothy and Titus is the language the Stoics used to describe the virtuous life. Paul was writing to Timothy, who was in the area of Ephesus where he was overseeing the appointment of elders. Titus was on the island of Crete. Both of these areas are very influenced by Stoic teaching, so Paul uses language with which the people living in this area are thoroughly familiar. Paul is not teaching Stoic virtue to Christians. That is not the point of what I am saying. No, it is explicitly Christian teaching. It is always related to the person of Christ. He is not teaching a kind of Stoic moralism. He never teaches virtue or morality that is not coming from God Himself and from His law, His Word, and the teaching of Christ. He is faithful to that. He is under law to Christ as he describes himself, but he is perfectly happy to use the language of the culture. That does three things. First of all, it communicates to these people in ways that they can understand what it means to be a Christian in their society. Second, it helps them to know that they can live as Christians in such a way that will bring

credit on the Gospel in their culture. Third, it will help them to communicate their faith as Christians to the people around them in language that will be accessible to their hearers.

Let us talk about “house codes.” House codes are, for example, in Colossians, Ephesians, and 1 Peter. Paul teaches the believers about their way of life in marriage, family, and work. He speaks to husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants. That pattern of teaching is not original with Paul. The pattern of teaching itself is borrowed from the Stoics. That is how they taught virtue, with the house codes. Again, Paul is not teaching Stoic house codes or Stoic virtues; he relates all of these things to Christ. “Husbands, love your wife as Christ loved the church. Wives, submit to your husband as to the Lord. Masters, you are going to give an account. You have a Master in heaven. Servants, work as those who are serving Christ.” He relates every one of these things explicitly to the uniqueness of the Christian faith. He uses the teaching pattern, and he is happy to use language that is taken from the culture. There are endless examples of this in the New Testament.

Another interesting term is *epiphaneia*—“appearance.” This term was used when the emperor visited a city. He made an appearance, a public appearance, the outshining of the emperor’s glory. The New Testament writers used that to speak about the coming of Christ when He is going to make His appearance as the Great King, the Great Emperor. He is going to return and His glory will be revealed, will be manifest. They have used a cultural term to communicate something about the return of Christ. This is constant through the New Testament.

Some of you may have wondered in a speculative kind of a way as you read the Gospels and then read the epistles why “the kingdom of God” basically disappears. It does not entirely disappear, but it is hardly there in the epistles despite the fact that it is on every page of Matthew’s Gospel over and over again. It is simply because in the epistles the phrase would not have communicated culturally. The doctrine is still there; it is presented in a different form. It would have been open to enormous misunderstanding by the Gentiles. It would have been seen as a statement that was politically and immediately subversive. The Christians were quite prepared to be politically subversive. They would only acknowledge Jesus as Lord. That is why they were put to death. They were not prepared to say Jesus was one God among many gods, one Lord among many lords. They would not offer incense to Caesar as Lord, as God, so they were quite prepared to be politically subversive. That was seen not just as a religious offense but as a political offense. That is why the Christians were killed in the first centuries. They did not want to unnecessarily antagonize people. If they had gone around talking about another kingdom, they would have had even worse problems than they did have, so they changed their language to communicate carefully to the people around them.

Your challenge now is to do exactly that. You see, there is nothing sacred about using biblical terms to talk to people. After all, you have an English Bible. It is not Hebrew and it is not Greek. It is not original. It has already been translated so that it would make sense to people several hundred years ago. Until the Reformation, the people had only basically what they got to hear Sunday by Sunday. The Bible was in Latin in Jerome’s translation from the 4th Century, the vulgate. The services on Sundays in the churches were in Latin rather than the language of the people. The Bible readings were in Latin, and most people did not understand them at all. Only the highly educated understood. Even before the Reformation began, people like Wycliffe in England were preaching in the language of the people. Wycliffe trained a band of preachers who went all over England preaching the Gospel, and he translated the Bible into English for the people. Christians in England were intent on communicating the Gospel in a language that people could understand. They were demystifying Christianity. The medieval church basically mystified the Gospel as something only the priests understood. Luther said, “I want every farmer and plowboy and kitchen maid to be able to read the Bible for themselves in language that they

can understand.” So Luther translated the Bible into German himself. You have this everywhere where the Reformation had any impact. Of course, they were not using some words that were not familiar to people, some special sacred words. They used language that the people who read it could immediately understand. And they did it not only with the Bible. As you look at the services of worship that were created all through the countries where the Reformation had any impact, they immediately wrote the services in the language of the people and in language they could understand. They wrote hymns in language that people could understand and they used music that the people could understand.

In Geneva, for example, Calvin himself was involved with the translation of the Psalms into the French of the people. He wrote the introduction to that first Psalter in French, which was published in Geneva for the use of the church to be able to sing. Then they brought in one of the best known musicians of the day. They did not bring in somebody from 500 years ago. He was a court musician in Paris. He was converted through Reformed faith, and they brought him to Geneva. He wrote melodies for the Psalms to be sung which were considered so outrageously contemporary by some people that they referred to them as “Geneva Jigs.” You might find that surprising if you listen to those melodies now; Christians are always ready to be critical of contemporary things. Wherever the Gospel has been alive, people have been committed to translating the message and communicating it in a form that is accessible to the people around them. It happened as Paul used the house codes to communicate Christian morality in the language of the Stoics. And it happened as the Reformers in Geneva brought in a contemporary musician to compose melodies for them to sing Psalms in the language of their hearts.

That is the issue; the Gospel has got to be translated into the language of the heart. It is seriously wrong for us to require people to learn a special language before they can understand the Gospel. It is the exact opposite of the incarnation. God is constantly stooping to us—that is the Gospel. In Christ, He has come all the way down to us and He calls us to go to people to speak in words that they can understand. That is why I keep insisting on this. Whether the person thinks they are a Christian or whatever they think they are, you must learn to communicate biblical truth in words that are the ordinary words. They need to be the words of people’s real life so that they can immediately relate to them. They should not be special religious words that do not have any meaning to their heart and to their minds, which they associate just with church, which they do not think are important. No, you must be prepared to use the language of the people to whom you go. It is a biblical command. It is what God Himself has done. We so easily tend to put things in concrete terms.

Let me use some examples from the Old Testament. We look at the Psalms, for example, in Hebrew poetry and we tend to think of the language and the poetry itself as something completely different, sacred, special, and biblical. It was not. Hebrew literary conventions are common to the culture. The people in the other cultures around Israel have the same kind of poetry as the Psalmist, though it is not as good. This is some of the greatest poetry ever written, but it is common to the culture. You can find psalms praising Baal using the same kind of poetic structures; there is parallelism and contrast. Hebrew poetry does not have rhyme like English poetry. Hebrew songs do not have rhyme like English poetry. They have other literary conventions. Some of the literary conventions are immediately obvious to you when you read the Psalms, but they are part of the cultural context in which the people of God lived. Even some of the language used to describe God in those psalms is part of the cultural context. When, for example, you see these wonderful images that God makes of the clouds, His chariots, and riding on the wings of the wind, that is not a unique image to the Old Testament. You find the same images used to describe Baal in the cultures around Israel. Now, you should not be alarmed by this. They are simply using the language of their culture to express their faith. It is the same point I am making throughout this session. It is the same with Proverbs. Proverbs are not unique to Israel. There are collections of proverbs from Egypt and other cultures around the people of Israel. And some of the proverbs in the book of

Proverbs are taken from Egyptian collections and other collections. This is a cultural way of speaking. That does not make them any less true, that is not the point, so do not misunderstand what I am saying here. This is still God's inerrant Word. Everything it says is true, but it is communicated in a language that is accessible to the people. It is in a poetic form and in a form of teaching wisdom that is accessible to the people. This is part of their culture. The Hebrews loved word games; it is part of their culture. That is why you have got Psalms that are acrostic; that is, one verse starts with the letter *aleph*, then *beth*, then so on through the Hebrew alphabet from A to Z. There are several psalms like that, for example, Psalm 25 and 34. Psalm 119 has all those verses because every verse is done after a letter in the alphabet. And in each section, every verse—every line—starts with that same letter of the alphabet. They like word games. That is part of their culture. That is not somehow uniquely Christian.

It is a cultural means of speaking, and we have to learn to adapt ourselves in the same way. You know this very well. If God calls you to be a missionary in some other part of the world, you have got to learn the language of the people to whom you go. You will not go there expecting them to speak English. You are going to go and learn Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, or whatever it is wherever you go. Of course you do not expect them to learn your language. It is the same in this culture. You have got to learn the language of the people to whom you go and be prepared to speak it rather than saying, "You have to learn my special Christian language, the language of Zion, before I am prepared to talk to you." That is central. God calls us to communicate to be all things to all people.