

Deism

Heavenly Father, we want to thank You for today. We thank You for Your grace and kindness and patience with us every day of our lives. You see us as we are and yet You delight in us because of the love and sacrifice of Your Son, Father. We do desire that we might learn of You and walk in Your ways, and we pray that You would teach us. Be with us today, open our minds and hearts, and help us to think clearly. We ask for Jesus' sake. Amen.

As we finish our section on challenge from the last lesson, at the end of the session we were looking at some of the areas where we have to challenge people in the culture in which we live: the idolatry of money, the idolatry of personal freedom and of self-affirmation—living for the pursuit of one's own happiness—and the idolatry of tolerance. I want to say a little bit about how we challenge people. God's Word must come as a challenge to people because coming to faith in Christ requires repentance. It requires turning away from what one has believed (what one has given one's life to, the sins of one's heart and life) and turning to Christ. So the Gospel has to come with a challenge. But I want to make a couple of points about that challenge and how you make it. First of all, the challenge itself must always be made with grace. Even when we challenge people, we must be those who are bearing a message of grace. God's Word is indeed like a two-edged sword. One edge is to wound but the other is to heal. When we challenge someone, the purpose is always for their ultimate healing because we are calling them to respond to the wonderful grace of God in Jesus Christ. So, even the challenge itself must conform to that message of grace. That is the first point.

The second is this: when you challenge people, you must always challenge them as someone who is aware that you are a sinner yourself. You can never challenge them from a position of superiority, "Look at you, you idolater, struggling with this idol of money, or freedom, or the pursuit of your own happiness." You have to come down off your pedestal to level ground, to the same level as the person to whom you are speaking, because you struggle with the same idols and the same sins. You never speak as someone who is not tested and struggling with the same problems and difficulties as those to whom you are speaking. You are going to speak as a sinner who is redeemed by the grace of God, and who, even as you are sharing the challenge of the Gospel, has sin in your heart. "I am a sinner myself. I have an idol factory in my heart." And that changes the way you speak to people. You can address issues like personal freedom and the pursuit of one's own happiness and the idolatry of money because you know that you wrestle with the same things and it will change the way you speak. So even the challenge must not come from a position of superiority but must always be tempered by grace and by the knowledge of your own sin.

I want to give a brief introduction to deism and the history of it. Deism is the religion of the great majority of Americans today, though they would not categorize themselves as Deists. And there is no point in telling people that they are a deist because they would not understand what you meant. The fact is, the overwhelming majority of the people around us still believe in God—well over 90% of them. That is the practical reality. Many people who attend church, who are not genuinely believers redeemed by Christ, are deists. That is the practical reality of where we are. This is true in Protestant churches, especially in liberal Protestant churches. It is true for many Catholic and Orthodox churches. It is true for many people who are Jews and who attend synagogues. They are actually functionally deists without recognizing it. There is not a lot written about deism. There is an excellent chapter in James Sire's book, *The Universe Next Door*, and then there is a book on it that was published back in 1934. Karen Armstrong, who used to be a Catholic nun and who rebelled against Christianity and hates it, has written several books expressing deistic views today. You can see those if you go to any bookstore. There are

several books by Karen Armstrong that are basically deist. She is an interesting example of a contemporary deist. Deism is a halfway house, really, for people on the move between Christianity and full-blown secularism.

What are the origins of deism? As far as the English language is concerned, in the English-speaking people, the father of deism is a man named Lord Herbert of Cherbury. He was an Englishman who was writing in the period around 1620-1650 (those are not the dates of his life but of the period in which he was writing). His mother, Lady Magdalen Herbert, was a deeply committed evangelical believer, and his brother, George Herbert, is one of the greatest poets to write in the English language. He was also a passionately committed Christian. If you look in the Trinity Hymnal, you will see a couple of hymns by him. Herbert, among other things as well as his poetry, wrote a book on being a country pastor, which was a classic and went through dozens and dozens of editions. But his elder brother, Lord Edward Herbert, is the father of deism. At that time, many scholars wrote in Latin rather than in English, and he wrote his books in Latin. They have never been translated into English, but they were still enormously influential because most educated people at that time could read Latin. He wrote in Latin and his works were also translated into French and were enormously influential in France. The two basic books for which he is known are *De Veritate*, which means “concerning the truth” and *De Religione Gentilium*, which is “concerning the religion of the nations.” He also wrote an autobiography. Most people have not heard of him, but he was extremely influential at the time.

Some factors that influenced the rise of deism include the desire to push the Reformation further, travel (which was opening up the world), and the fact that people in Europe were becoming aware of people in Asia, in particular, where people were followers of other religions. They were very surprised to discover that they had some belief in God and had strong moral standards. They should not have been surprised if they had read their Bibles a little more carefully because Scripture teaches us that God’s wisdom speaks to the whole human race, and in every nation there are laws that are just and right (see Proverbs 8). So, a desire to push the reformation further, travel, and discovering other cultures and their religions (especially those from the Far East—the new scientific revolution) were factors in the rise of deism. Newton himself was a Christian, one who wrote so much about the structure of our solar system and the laws that govern it. Many of his contemporaries drew the conclusion that if the solar system is so wonderfully structured then it is basically like a clock that God wound up and left there, and we do not need God for its ongoing running. That was not Newton’s conclusion at all, but it was the conclusion of people like Lord Herbert and many of his contemporaries.

A fourth factor in the rise of deism was the religious wars that devastated Europe after the Reformation. Many people responded to these by calling Christianity into question if it produced such terrible fighting. Of course, those wars were bound up also with all sorts of nationalism and a desire for power and rulers. There were not only religious factors, but religion was a part of them. Those four factors had a great influence on Herbert and also many of his contemporaries. Herbert asked the following three questions: how may truth be distinguished from error? We need an infallible test to discern what is true religion. How can we formulate a faith that receives the agreement of all people? And how can we find a religion that can avoid the bitter wars and controversies that plagued Europe half the Reformation? Basically, we are saying we want a common denominator for religions, and that is really what deism is. His answer to these questions was that universal consent—those areas where all religions agree on the basics of religion—is going to be the test of what is true. So he basically said, “How do we find out what this universal consent is?” And he said there are two sources. We study religion, so the study of comparative religions is one source. Some of this sounds very contemporary. People are still doing the same thing today. I am sure some of you studied religion at a university. This is basically what you will have gotten: the study of comparative religion and what Herbert called “The oracle within,” our own

reason and our moral conscience. In the end my own heart is going to tell me what the truth is. For him, that was the ultimate test of truth. We can study other religions, but in the end it is up to me to discern what is religiously true.

Herbert had five basic beliefs. First, he believed in God as the supreme power. Second, he believed that God must be worshipped. Third, he believed that human beings should commit themselves to moral behavior. Fourth, he believed that we can expiate our own sins by repentance. He did not like the notion that we have to put our trust in Christ to have our sins dealt with. He rejected that completely. “I have to be able to take care of my own problems, so I can expiate my own sins by repentance.” And last, he believed strongly that there is an afterlife with rewards and punishments. He did not think everyone was going to heaven. It is interesting that deism today is much more vague even than Herbert was. But here Herbert is defining what he calls a universal religion, a natural religion. He even called it “common sense Christianity.” You find people using the same sort of expression today as they think about deism. There are lots of nominal Christians out there who think that their views are basically those of “common sense Christianity,” a basic, natural, worldwide religion. Those are his five basic beliefs, and we can add two more. There is a universal church made up of all people who assent to these basic beliefs, and he rejects the Bible as revelation. “Revelation,” he said, “is every divine and happy sentiment within.” It is fascinating reading him today. There is an extraordinary kind of optimism about his writing that just sounds quite bizarre in the present context. But at the time, his ideas were fairly radical.

I am going to say a little about the history of deism. Deism had a huge impact. It is difficult to underestimate the influence of it. William Law wrote a classic on the Christian life called *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. William Law, writing around 1700, said that Christianity was universally scoffed at and a lot of that is the consequence of deism. It had a huge impact. Most people in the churches basically became deists by 1700. It is one of the reasons there was the need for the evangelical revival starting in the 1740s under the leadership of Wesley and Whitfield and others. The churches themselves were predominately deistic by that time—shortly after the Reformation and even more shortly after the Great Puritan Revival in the early 1600s. At the same time, deism was at work, having a devastating impact.

The Cambridge Platonists, many of them who had a Reformed background because the Reformed churches, were not exempt from the influence of deism with its very strong emphasis on reason. Reason, good conduct, rational truth, and moral conduct became more important than supernatural Christianity and the revelation of God in His Word for many people in the church.

John Locke, the very famous political theorist and philosopher, is one of the most influential people on the development of our own political system here in the United States, in Britain, and many other places as well. He is a hugely influential writer and thinker. In his book, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke argued that true Christian faith—and he may well have been a Christian—is found only in the Gospels and Acts and that the letters of the apostles are an unnecessary addition. What you have is the beginnings of what is later called “higher criticism” in the writings of people like Locke who were deeply influenced by the deists. They are subjecting the Bible to their own ideas about what true religion is and how it developed. So their own thinking, their own reasoning processes become the arbiter of what is true.

Another example is John Toland. He is the first one who really comes up with the view that there is a radical distinction in the New Testament between Jewish and Gentile Christianity. As you study the Gospels, Acts, and the Pauline epistles, you will come across that idea constantly from liberal critics

today as well. Toland appears to be the first person to make this argument very seriously. These guys all wrote around 1730-1740.

Matthew Tindal is the best-known deist historically. He was called at the time “the great apostle of deism,” and his book, *Christianity as Old as Creation*, was called “the bible of deism.” The subtitle is “The Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature.” He was saying that reason is the ultimate judge of truth. He is one of the first writers in an influential way to draw attention to what the apostles teach about the second coming. He said, “The apostles seem to expect the second coming in their life. They were wrong. It did not happen. Why should we believe them about anything else?” Again, you will still hear that argument from people today both on a popular level but also on a more sophisticated level in some of the liberal critics of the Scriptures that you will read. We cannot trust the Bible then. All we can trust is reason. Tindal gave four arguments for natural religion. He said that the original religion (long before Moses or any biblical figure existed) that came from God when He first created the human race is the best religion, and nothing else can change it. He basically argued for natural religion. There are five basic beliefs, and they are very interesting. You will see the change from Herbert to Tindal. Tindal wrote 110-120 years after Lord Herbert. His basic beliefs were a belief in God and the worship of God.

Third—and I think this is probably the first time we find this expression appearing and being vastly influential right up to our own time—was his belief in the pursuit of happiness. That is what we are here for—to pursue our own happiness and also to work for the common good and common happiness of other people. Fourth, he believed in life after death. (He backed off a bit from the strong emphasis on judgment that you get still in Lord Herbert.) His book was enormously influential. You may never have heard of him, but at the time it was hugely influential. It went through many, many editions, and 150 Christian books and pamphlets were written in response to it by believers because it had such a huge impact at the time.

Other examples are Thomas Chubb, another deistic writer. Again, you get ideas here that become part of criticism of the Bible later on, right up until the present time. We have to distinguish between Jesus’ teachings and the teachings of the apostles, both in the epistles but also, unlike Locke, in the Gospels as well. Locke said the Gospels are pure, but Chubb was saying the Gospels are not pure either. We have to distinguish between what Jesus really said and the opinions of the apostles that are superimposed into the Gospels. My point is that much of what we see in liberal criticism, and that you still get from liberal pulpits and liberal seminaries today, is already there in the deists in the 1700s. That is really where it comes from, and you can actually trace it historically in terms of the ideas.

Thomas Morgan, another one, a Quaker, introduced the idea of the inner light. He, in particular, drew attention to the conflict between Peter and Paul in Galatians. This time, he put a different spin on it that Paul is the true follower of Jesus whereas Jewish Christianity, as represented by Peter and James, is not faithful to Christ in the way that Paul was.

The year 1740 or 1750 was the high water mark of deism. There are several reasons why deism declined, which it did, dramatically—and certainly in Britain at the time. One reason was the apologetic arguments given by Christians, the responses to the works of Tindal and others, some of which were fine works. Second, of course was the evangelical revival that brought the Gospel back into the churches. When Wesley and Whitfield started preaching, they were not allowed to preach in churches because they were so influenced by deism. That is why they began to preach in the fields and the marketplaces. Later on, as God prospered their work and brought many people to faith, they could not get in the churches anyway because there were tens of thousands of people listening to them. Whitfield could speak easily to 60,000 people in the open air, and they did not have microphones or loud speakers. He

had, his contemporaries say, “a voice like a trumpet.” You know, he could speak to 60,000 people without any means of magnification, without any difficulty and not just for ten minutes but for hours. They preached for a long time, and they sang for a long time. Many of Charles Wesley’s hymns, the brother of John Wesley (the preacher), were 30 or 40 verses long. When people say, “We should sing all the verses of a hymn,” you need to remember that in your hymn book you often only have a few of the original verses. It is not a very sensible thing to say. We have a selection already. But Wesley wrote hymns 30 or 40 verses long, and they were primarily written to be sung by unbelievers at evangelistic meetings. That was the context in which many of them were sung. Many of you know those hymns by Wesley still today. The context of their original composition and the purpose of their singing was to support the Gospel that John Wesley and other evangelists were proclaiming.

A second reason, perhaps the primary reason, for the decline of deism was the evangelical revival, which had an enormous impact on all the churches and brought probably millions of people to faith by the power of the Spirit. David Hume showed that reason is not an adequate source of truth, and that really dealt a deathblow to the thinking of deism that was absolutely dependent upon the validity of reason.

Deism declined very rapidly in Britain, but it had several ongoing consequences. It continued to be very influential in France. Herbert’s works were translated into French, as were some of these other writings, too. Deism and Rationalism took a very deep hold in France, and rationalism is still probably dominant in France more than any other country in the world even to this day. There are some particular historical reasons for that. One of them was the dreadful persecution of the Protestants under Louis the XIV when many were killed, enslaved, put in galleys, and many fled the country to save their lives. History is extraordinarily moving—the radical destruction of the Protestant church in France, which was huge even before the death of Calvin. There were two million Protestants at least in France converted through the ministry of people trained under Calvin in Geneva primarily. It was a vast church in France that was almost totally destroyed under the reign of Louis the XIV. So deism had a great influence in France. One of its consequences was the rise of historical criticism in Germany. Several of the founders of historical criticism of the Bible, or the higher criticism of the Bible in Germany, were directly influenced by the deists. They went to England to study and read the deists’ works, and they developed these ideas into what was called “the science of biblical criticism.” While deism diminished to some degree in Britain, it continued to flourish here in the United States. It was greatly diminished by the First and Second Great Awakenings but never really died out. Unitarianism, which is very strong in New England, is an ongoing form of deism, one can say.

So deism continued to be very powerful here in the United States. Its ideas, in particular, the idea of the pursuit of happiness and the god of nature, continued to be very influential here. You see this in both the founding documents of the country and especially in the writings of Thomas Jefferson, who was a passionate, committed deist who hated evangelical Christianity.

Now, I want to come to deism today. The history of deism is a fascinating history, but my primary reason for going through it and drawing your attention to it is to notice how similar the arguments of supporters of deism today are to those made by people like Lord Herbert and Matthew Tindal. There is nothing new under the sun. As I said, most people today do not think of themselves as deists.

What are some of the factors favoring deism today? First is the powerful emphasis on individualism. We live in a culture where the individual is considered to have the primacy in matters of belief. Religion in America is very much a personal thing. People are reluctant to accept anything on authority, whether it is the authority of the Bible, the authority of the church, or the authority of a pastor. You would be

amazed how true that is in many of our own congregations. Lots of people actually keep their own views to themselves. They listen to what pastors say, but they reserve the judgment and continue to hold their own views because they, like most people around us, think of religion as something that is primarily personal in the sense that I can decide for myself what is true. You remember earlier I used the example of the Pope's visit to St. Louis where he was rapturously received. But the vast majority of the Catholics who went to hear him and rapturously received him have no intention of believing everything that he says or of doing what he says. Again, that is not an attack on Catholics or Catholicism, but that is true for people in other churches as well. That is why in our churches we may preach about abortion and marital fidelity, but most of our churches have the same levels of those things as the rest of the culture. That is the practical reality. People regard religion as a matter of their own personal choice and authority. They are not very good at listening to anybody else.

A second factor favoring deism today is the fact that we live in a pluralistic society. Again, we spoke about this earlier in the semester, but the very fact that we are surrounded by people with such diverse religious views pushes people toward deism. In the 17th century it was travel and awareness of what people in other parts of the world believed that pushed Lord Herbert and others to deism. In our day, it is this factor of being surrounded by people who have other religious convictions. It is actually much easier, of course, to hold on to your convictions as the truth if everybody around you thinks the same way. But when you have decent neighbors who are Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists and Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, then you have to really be committed to say, "What I believe is the truth." So, pluralism pushes people in this direction to water down the distinctive doctrines of Christianity.

A third factor is that our culture teaches tolerance and respect for other people's views so strongly that many people equate tolerance with the abandonment of particular beliefs. For many people around us, and it is a challenge for everyone in our churches, the cult of tolerance seems to undercut truth claims and pushes people in the direction of wanting a common religious denominator. If I am going to respect and be tolerant of my neighbors, can I really say that what I believe is the truth and what they believe is false? This is very challenging in our culture.

The fourth factor is the reaction against Christian doctrines that are disliked or misunderstood because they go against the spirit of the age. If we talk publicly and clearly about sin, judgment, exclusive truth, hell, and the exclusiveness of the Gospel of Christ, those are not popular doctrines in our culture. There are many evangelical churches in which they are not clearly taught because they are so unpopular. People move toward watering down the Christian faith, and that pushes them toward deism.

And finally, a fifth factor favoring deism today is the confused teaching that exists particularly in many mainline churches. Of course, there are mainline churches that are solidly biblical and evangelical, but in many mainline churches the teaching is confused and compromised by the spirit of the age. In many mainline churches the majority of people are deists. That is the reality. We, in response to these pressures, must proclaim the truth of Christianity and its particular doctrines clearly, especially those that are unpopular today. It is just like Luther said, "You can preach the Gospel in the loudest voice and in the clearest manner at every point except where it is under attack in the culture and you really have not preached it at all." You can talk about Christ and his death and resurrection, but if you do not emphasize that this is the only way of salvation, you are not preaching the Gospel in our moment of history. If you do not preach the reality of the judgment of God against unbelief and sin and the reality of final, eternal judgment, you are not preaching the Gospel in our culture today. You have to proclaim that truth in love. That is always so, but you must proclaim it. If people in your congregations, where you are going to serve, do not like it because it offends against the spirit of the age, then you have to still keep preaching it. You do not water it down. I very rarely mention people's names, but if you listen to

Robert Schuller, his gospel, he never talks about sin and the judgment of God, the exclusive nature of truth, the necessity of coming to faith in Christ to be saved, or the substitutionary atonement, the means of our salvation. If you listen to him you will notice that he is vague on all of those things. He does not want to be pinned down. If he is asked questions in interviews, he avoids them when those issues are raised. He is not prepared to address issues that go against the spirit of the age, and that is going to be a temptation for every one of you as you go out.

I was talking today with another professor and he said, “You know, one of the challenges that chaplains face because they have to work in a context where they are working alongside people who are liberal theologically—Jewish rabbis who are chaplains, radical feminists who have redefined the Gospel in extreme ways, and all sorts of others—is that they start watering down what they say because they do not want to offend.” You will see this even with those who have solid training. They want to fit in. It is a pressure in the chaplaincy. It is a pressure in the churches. And if we do not preach the whole counsel of God and particularly those areas that are under pressure in our culture, we end up basically turning people in the churches into deists rather than preaching a genuinely Christian Gospel.

What are some of the beliefs of deism today? You will see similarities here to the ideas of Lord Herbert and Matthew Tindal but also some differences. First, the great majority of people believe that there is a god or that there is god rather than a god—god who created, in some sense, but who is distant and not truly involved in our lives. Most people believe in some form of evolution along with affirming that God originally made everything. Most people around you think that there is a god, and they will even pray to him in moments of crisis in their lives (when they are about to take an exam or write a paper or when somebody gets ill or has an accident or when they are facing the prospect of death for themselves or for somebody in their family). Most people pray but only in times of crisis. Or they pray for things, for more things, for material possessions, and health and comfort, but they do not pray for righteousness. One of the marks of genuine Christian prayer is if somebody is praying for righteousness and not just for things. Christian prayer is not regarding God as a giant slot machine in the sky who gives us what we want especially when we are in trouble. Rather, it is regarding Him as the one to whom I bow and ask to forgive me, direct me, and change me. We need to be careful of this ourselves.

A second belief of deism today is that all religions are basically the same. That is what the overwhelming majority of people around us believe. About three-fourths to 80% of the general population in America think all religions are basically the same and lead to the same end. What is disturbing is that half the people in evangelical churches do, too. Any surveys that are done on this will come out with those results. That is what I meant when I said people do not all listen to what is being preached.

Third, there is an acceptance of natural law. Natural law includes the physical structure of the world. People around us mostly believe that the universe runs like a clock on its own. That image of the clock that the early deists used is still very popular. People think that the universe is governed by physical laws in which God is not involved in any way. The Christian says something quite different. The physical laws are simply a description of the way God governs the world. That is how Newton understood them, and he was right. But most people, including many people in our churches, really do not think that way. All of us are deeply touched by this idea of naturalism that the universe basically functions by itself and that this is a closed system of cause and effect that runs by itself. That is not the way Scripture speaks. God is the one who gives the rain, who makes the sunshine, and who makes the rivers run down the hills. The whole physical universe is governed by God. The laws of physics and the laws of biology are simply describing the way God governs the universe in an orderly manner. Again, that is what Newton thought he was discovering—the way God rules the world. But deists have no

expectation of God's intervention in this world. The universe is a clock that runs by itself. Francis Schaeffer wrote an excellent article on this called "The Universe and Two Chairs." In the article he is asking the question, "What chair are you sitting in?" Are you sitting in a chair, a biblical, Christian chair—and I am talking about your daily life now—in which you truly believe that this universe is open to the work of God, that He can act in your life and does act in your life every day and that your life is completely open to Him? God's intervention in this world is not an extraordinary thing once in a while for occasions like the Exodus or the resurrection of Christ, but God is constantly at work in this world. It is the basis of all your prayers. Or are you sitting in the materialist chair or the deist chair and really thinking of the universe as a closed system in which God does not act at all or only very rarely? What chair are you sitting in? The deist is sitting in the chair of natural law in the sense of the physical laws that govern the world.

Fourth, deism assumes that there is a moral order in the world. This is discoverable by looking at the universe and at humanity. The term "natural law" is also used here. Natural law is thought of as that moral law that is intrinsic to the way God has structured the world. That emphasis on a natural, moral law is very strong in Roman Catholic tradition. It is also, of course, present in the Declaration of Independence, which says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident..." Any deist can say that, and the deists did say that there is a basic, moral structure to the world that is self-evident. Even people who do not believe in God at all still hold to this view. My father was a Marxist who did not believe in God, but he basically believed the second half of The Ten Commandments was self-evidently true. There is a moral structure to reality.

We should notice that in our time, and this is rather different from the deism of the 1600s or the 1700s, that people may hold in theory to natural law in the sense that they say there is a moral law, but people are less and less governed by it because of the powerful emphasis on individualism and being a law to myself in our culture. So we have two notions of conflict in our culture. People appeal to the notion of a moral law when they are criticizing other people. But when it comes to their own lives, they are a law to themselves. That is actually the tension in which our culture lives, and most everybody around us is caught in that with this sense that there really is an ultimate distinction between right and wrong. But when it comes to their own lives, they want to have the freedom to do what they want to do, and they think that is a natural right. People are very confused at that point, and it is a very good issue on which to preach the Gospel in our present moment. It is good news that there is indeed a moral order that is founded in the character of God. It is very good news in our culture.

A fifth belief in deism today is that there is no sense of the corruption of human nature or the impact of the Fall on our moral nature, our will, or our minds." Deists today basically think human beings are good. They consistently underestimate the reality of evil and especially the reality of evil in their own hearts.

A seventh belief is a confidence in human reason and the moral conscience. If you look at someone like Thomas Jefferson, he has great confidence in the power of human reason and his own conscience as an adequate guide for one's life. Again, those ideas are still present in our culture though they are being radically undermined in many of the people around us. Most of the people you are going to talk to are an odd combination of deists. They will say they believe in God and these other things, but they are also radically postmodern in the sense that they are doing their own thing and being their own authority.

A seventh belief is the pursuit of personal happiness; we are here for the fulfillment of ourselves. That is the purpose of our existence. The most widely held conviction in our culture is that I am here to fulfill myself and pursue my own happiness, and I can decide how that is going to be done. That is very

challenging to us. Am I here to glorify God or am I here to pursue my own happiness? And the Christian has to answer by saying, "I am here to glorify God. That is the fundamental purpose of my existence and any happiness that comes will come as a fruit of that." But I can never say that I am here for the pursuit of my own happiness, no matter how popular it is around us.

An eighth belief of deism today is a vague optimism about the future that for many of our contemporaries is bound up in nationalism. Deism tends toward civil religion: flag waving in the name of God. Of course, this optimism is being radically undermined by postmodernism, but it is still there in many older people. The younger people are, the less optimism you will find when you examine them deeply, but it is still there in some older people.

And finally, there is a vague belief in an afterlife but with no real sense of judgment. Most of the people around us think that mass-murderers and tyrants will be judged but not you or me. Most people believe in an afterlife, but they tend to be more like the Greeks in the sense that they believe that the soul will go on. They do not have much notion of physical resurrection or a physical future. That is true even in many of our churches. You teach people clearly that Jesus is physical today, that He rose from the dead not just to prove to His disciples that He conquered death but to prove that He is God and man forever. People are really shocked in most churches when you emphasize that. If you teach them clearly that they are going to be raised up and be physical forever and that they are going to live in a physical universe, they are surprised. Even in many evangelical churches, people's idea of the future is very vague. They think that there will be a kind of wafting around, like souls on clouds. You can think of the popular images in commercials and in television shows and that is really what people think, including many people who have some genuine Christian faith. They have very vague ideas of the future. And for those who are called deists, their ideas of the future are going to be mixed up with the ideas of reincarnation more and more with the increasing popularity of New Age thinking.

Those are some of the basic beliefs of deists today, and you will run across these in many of the people you meet around us. Before I talk a little bit about some danger signals with evangelicalism, I have a few other comments here. One of the things we are increasingly finding is that people who are deists, if we want to use that word, are more and more open to the ideas of the New Age movement. This movement only influenced a tiny minority 20 years ago but today influences a lot of the population, somewhere between 25% and 40%. It is more influential all the time. And yet, there are a couple of ways in which deists become drawn toward New Age thinking. One is their belief that all religions are basically the same and lead to the same goal and destination. You will constantly find the idea emphasized in New Age thinking that religion is really about spirituality with all these different roads but they are all roads to the end. If you read a book like James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy*, one of his main points is that all religions are basically taking us to the same end.

The second factor here is that deism is not satisfying spiritually. Of course it is not. It does not teach any kind of personal relationship with God. It is just a vague idea of God. God, who is there, provides some satisfying answers in the sense that He made the world and He is there to shout to in a crisis, but He has no effect on my daily life at all. It does not make any difference to me. It is hard to find a passionate deist. Karen Armstrong is a passionate deist, but that is very unusual. She would not call herself a deist so much as a monotheist. That is how she describes herself and is much more favorable to Judaism and Islam than she is to Christianity. But very few people are passionate deists. There is nothing here to be passionate about. There is nothing here that is going to feed you spiritually. The god of deism cannot really be worshipped, loved, adored, or served. He is not going to meet your needs personally in terms of the turmoil of your own soul, and that is why the vast majority of people who are in the New Age movement are people who have come from dead churches. They have been given a religion that is not

Christianity but is deism, and it is spiritually totally unsatisfying. They think they have tried Christianity. They think they have found it wanting. They have not really tried it at all, but they turn to the New Age movement, which offers intensive spiritual experience, and that is, of course, its great attraction. But the overwhelming majority of people who get involved with New Age thinking of one kind or another are people who were basically deists. Deism is a halfway house for people who do not grasp what true Christianity is. Well, we do not like it, but it provides no food for the soul.

Let us look at some of the danger signals within evangelicalism because I think one of the problems today in evangelical churches—in all of our churches—is a drift toward deism. I want to make a series of very quick points here. The first danger signal is a softness on other religions. (“But they also have truth that will lead to salvation if it is pursued.”) That is present in much contemporary Roman Catholicism. It is present in the documents of the Vatican Council II from the 1960s. It is very, very clear that other religions—Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, etc.—are paths toward the knowledge of God and salvation. It is clear in the teachings of the present Pope, despite the fact that he is a conservative Catholic, that he quite clearly regards people from other religions as being brothers and sisters in the same faith in God. He uses that kind of expression repeatedly when he is talking to and about Jews and Muslims and others as well. So it is a growing movement within Catholicism, but it is also a growing movement within evangelicalism as well. I spoke earlier in the semester about the book *The Wideness of God’s Mercy*, which teaches that people who are sincere members of other religious faiths are going to be saved. That kind of teaching, that it is not necessary to come to explicit faith in Christ but that there are anonymous Christians in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam, is the expression of Karl Rahner who is one of the leading theologians in the Catholic church and has been for more than a generation. And that kind of teaching is getting more and more currency within evangelical churches as well. It is my prediction—and I am no prophet—that that teaching is going to become like a flood within evangelicalism because it is one of those ways in which we are pressured to compromise to the spirit of the age. So it is going to become more and more widespread that you do not have to be a believer in Christ in order to be saved by Him. So a softness on other religions—sincerity instead of doctrine is considered to be more important—is a danger signal of deism. A belief that it is not what I believe but the sincerity of my heart that matters sounds good, but it is not true. Of course we have to sincerely believe, but we have to believe the truth.

A third danger signal is a hesitancy about the supernatural, a reluctance to talk about God’s intervention in history whether it is in my own life or in the lives of other nations.

And a fourth danger signal is a softness on all kinds of moral issues. One can predict the areas where people in our own evangelical churches are going to struggle with the pressures of the culture and back off from the clear teaching of God’s Word on moral issues. I am in the process of buying a car at the moment, and I will finish with this example. I have become good friends with the young guy who is the salesman. It turns out that he is a Christian. He has only been a Christian for the last three or four years, but it is clear that he has not had any kind of really solid teaching. He has clearly come to faith in Christ, but he telephoned me the other day with this question. He asked, “What does the Bible teach about my girlfriend moving in with me?” He had obviously never heard a sermon on the subject of chastity before marriage. He has been a Christian for three or four years, but he really wanted to know. I was quite amazed by his question, so I responded. At the end of it I said, “Do you mind telling me why you are asking me this question?” Although, I knew very well what his answer was going to be. He said, “No, my girlfriend and I were just talking about having her move into my apartment.” And I thanked him for being so open in asking such a question. He said, “Right, that is it. That is what God says. I will not do it.” It is an indication there is some genuine faith there. Here is a man who has been a Christian for three or four years and has not yet heard any clear teaching on this issue in the church that he attends. That is

the challenge of our culture. If 80% of people are sleeping around, having sex casually by the time they are 15 or 16 years old in high school, it is very challenging to teach about such moral issues clearly in our churches without treading on lots of people's toes. However, God's Word treads on toes. It is a sword that comes to challenge us to repentance as well as to faith.