

## JESUS IS THE MESSAGE OF MISSIONS

Faculty Address

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[Opening words of appreciation]

I wish to speak this morning on the topic “Jesus is the message of missions.” The title is simple. The topic seems simple. But we must never mistake “simple” for “inconsequential” or “unimportant” or “unweighty.” Dr. Tim Beougher begins the semester in his personal evangelism course with reference to the renowned football coach, Vince Lombardi. Lombardi once began the season by facing his players, holding up a football, and explaining, “Gentlemen, this is a football.” The point is obvious. No matter how much we think we know about a particular subject, we do well to revisit the basics often.

I was teaching Hebrew Syntax and Exegesis, and it was not long into the semester when I realized that many of the students seemed lost. I would speak of such basic matters as a *seghol* or a *waw consecutive* only to look out at a collection of confused faces. Without a knowledge of the basics, the students were not going to be able to reach the goals for that second semester of Hebrew. Consequently, we spent the first third of the semester re-laying the foundations. We went back to the basics.

The apostle Paul wrote, “no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 3:11).<sup>1</sup> To this foundation he found himself going over and over again. In an earlier section of the Corinthian correspondence, Paul clarified:

Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel . . . we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. . . . I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified (1Cor 1:17-2:1).

In the first two chapters of First Corinthians, Paul made use of the terms “preach,”

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<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from *The New American Standard Bible*.

“preached,” and “proclaiming.” Paul understood that he must preach, or proclaim, an essential message. Paul employed similar language elsewhere: “We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ” (Col 1:28).

I have always thought Paul to be a good model for those of us who aspire to take the gospel to the peoples of the earth. I recall, however, participating in a seminar in missiology. Throughout the semester, each time I spoke of “proclaiming the gospel” or “preaching the gospel,” the professor stopped me and explained, “We prefer not to use the terms ‘preach’ or ‘proclaim,’ rather, we emphasize the use of dialogue.”<sup>2</sup> At one point, the professor explained that to preach or proclaim is to occupy a position of authority, which can be interpreted by the audience as arrogance.

Well, we DO have something to proclaim, and that with authority! The Bible bears witness to Christ, and we must do the same. Edmund Clowney has understood this Christ-centered witness to be the key to unlocking the meaning of both testaments.<sup>3</sup> For example, in noting the encounter of the resurrected Jesus and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, Clowney commented: “Their hearts burned within them as they saw how *all the Scriptures* focused on Christ.”<sup>4</sup> John Stott has reminded us that, not only are we to reveal Christ, but to

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<sup>2</sup>Regarding the use of inter-religious dialogue, Timothy Tennent has provided an important discussion in which he noted three troublesome presuppositions often held by those who engage in such dialogue: 1) They often insist that participants suspend their own faith commitment before coming to the table, 2) Often an underlying conviction exists that there are no absolute truths, 3) No one is allowed to use the ‘c’ word—*conversion*. Timothy Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 13-16.

<sup>3</sup>Edmund Clowney, “Preaching Christ from all the Scriptures,” in *The Preacher and Preaching*, 163-191, ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), 164.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.* Italics mine.

“unveil him that people are drawn to come to him and to receive him.”<sup>5</sup> Often, teachers of homiletics have counseled their students: “In your preaching, wherever you begin, take that beginning and run straight to the cross.”

Attorney and Bible teacher, David Rogers, has observed: “Christian evangelism should always be respectful, loving and kind, yet faithful to the truth of the gospel. Christians should always present the gospel in a winsomely persuasive manner. To be sure, Christians have not always done so. But evangelism at its best is carried out with the heartfelt desire and hope that others would enter into the abundant life and salvation found only in Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

My thesis this morning is fairly straight-forward: From around the world, from different tribes and tongues and peoples and nations, those who would be saved must come to Jesus, and they must come to him as he is. If time permitted, I would talk about the concepts of bounded and unbounded sets in which the whole conversation revolves around the definition of a Christian, or the question of who can be saved. Darrell Whiteman has described the two models:

In a bounded set, you’re either in or you’re out. The difference is whether or not you’ve crossed the boundary. . . . In a centered set, the focus is not on the boundary, but on the center. Those converted are those moving toward the center rather than away. The issue is not how close the person is, but the direction he is headed.<sup>7</sup>

The distinction between the two sets is obvious. In the bounded set, in order to be counted among the saved, one must cross the boundary, which is determined doctrinally.

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<sup>5</sup>John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 325.

<sup>6</sup>David Rogers, “Knowing Jesus Christ as Lord is Point of Christianity,” *The Greenville News* (SC), June 21, 1998.

<sup>7</sup>Darrell Whiteman, Anthropology for Christian Mission, class notes from October 17, 2000, Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, KY.

That is, one must reject certain false teachings and accept certain truths. In a centered set approach to evangelism and missions, the question centers not on what one believes, rather, whether or not one is moving in a particular direction. The distance from the center (Jesus Christ) is not important. I cannot help but ask, then, can someone believe anything about Jesus and still be saved?

Henry Smith has affirmed and articulated well the outcome of the centered set approach: “. . . the measure of salvation is the measure of one’s faith not the measure of one’s knowledge.”<sup>8</sup> “What!?” we might then exclaim, “Does it matter that one’s knowledge about Jesus is faulty? Can one come savingly to Jesus believing that he is merely the return of the fifth Buddha? Can one come savingly to Jesus believing that he is the offspring of a physical union between a divine father and human mother?” Can one come savingly to Jesus believing that he is simply a good man? Or only one avatar among many? Or . . . well, I think you begin to understand my point.

We proclaim Jesus, a particular Jesus, Jesus as the son of God and savior of sinners. Merely to encourage people to articulate the name of Jesus, while allowing them to believe whatever they desire or devise in their own minds, is not a legitimate biblical strategy for the evangelist or missionary. The sons of Sceva made the mistake of thinking that the mere pronunciation of the name provided power to cast out demons (Acts 19). They knew the name “Jesus” but they did not know the man Jesus. In other words, they had come to a name, but they had not come to the man. Those to whom we go in missions must come to Christ as he is, not as he might wrongly be perceived.

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<sup>8</sup>Henry Smith, “Salvation in the Face of Many Faiths: Toward a Hermeneutic of Optimism,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* (Spring 1993):26-31.

## **Initial Acknowledgements**

Whether in North America or Africa or Asia or anywhere else, sinners are invited to come to Jesus as he is. They come to the one who is God incarnate. They come to the one whose ministry was one of compassion and caring. They come to the one who has made atonement, who has ascended to heaven and will one day return. I am not arguing that those who come to this savior must fully understand or clearly articulate all the mysteries contained in the gospel of Christ. Nor do I believe that believers, as they walk through this life, will fully grasp all there is to know about the person and work of Jesus. How many of us present this morning have fully comprehended all the deep truths of the Trinity?

I am bothered, however, that we often intentionally deliver a minimum of information about Jesus, the gospel and the Christian life, whether in North America or around the world. The Scriptures would have us teach the peoples of the world *all* things that God has commanded. I believe that our evangelistic efforts have too often been influenced by our own North American cultural context. In our culture, we like things fast. We like fast cars, fast food, fast cures, fast fixes, fast . . . well, you fill in blanks. And, we like our evangelism fast.

Let me provide just an inkling of where I am theologically. I absolutely believe in the absolute sovereignty of God. I know that he can sovereignly and powerfully, in a moment, break through to a lost sinner and bring that person quickly into the kingdom. I know that our God can repeat, in a fashion, the Damascus road incident anytime and anywhere that he wishes. But, we do not expect regularly to be able to reproduce that episode ourselves. Furthermore, even the apostle Paul was not a sudden convert from a pagan religion and a pagan worldview. He was well versed in the Scriptures. His was not an empty slate. He did

not come to that Damascus road experience with a dearth of information and knowledge.

I remember seeing Christopher Reeve, after suffering near-total paralysis, in a public service announcement on television. The camera zoomed in on his face as he talked to parents about raising children. After acknowledging the role of faith in his life, he encouraged parents to talk to their children about faith. I must say that I have nothing but admiration for Christopher and Dana Reeve.<sup>9</sup> The message of that ad, though, was a bit troubling to me. As I perceived the message, it was almost as if we were being encouraged simply to have faith in faith, or to exercise the power of positive thinking in order to make our way through life.

Such a message is consistent with the shift, even among many evangelicals I fear, from talking about the necessity of faith in Jesus, to talking about faith in God, to talking about simply having faith, whatever or whomever the object of that faith might be.

I am also aware that, often, we have but a short window of opportunity in which to share the gospel. In those moments, we should be ready to provide a quick and accurate message. But, always, whether in a few short minutes or over the period of a lengthy relationship, our goal should be to share as much about Jesus as we can.

I acknowledge that this address has much to do with theology. But, then, missions at its foundation is theological and concerned with doctrine, or truth. Ronald Nash has noted

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<sup>9</sup>In recent days, we have read the news reports of Dana Reeve's death. What a courageous and loving and faithful wife and mother! Married in 1992 to superman Christopher Reeve, in 1995, she saw her husband fall from a horse and suffer near-total paralysis. In his autobiography, "Still Me," Reeve wrote that he suggested early on to his wife, "Maybe we should let me go." She responded, "I'll be with you for the long haul, no matter what. You're still you and I love you." Jim Fitzgerald, "Dana Reeve Dies of Lung Cancer at 44," Associated Press, 8 March 2006 [on-line]; accessed 11 March 2006; available from <http://www.stamfordadvocate.com/entertainment/sns-ap-obit-reeve,0,2075597.story?coll=sns-ap-entertainment-headlines>.

that from its inception the Christian church has been involved in battles involving ideas, theories, systems of thought, presuppositions and arguments.<sup>10</sup> Andrew Hoffercker has described the battle:

In some instances Christian thought is simply portrayed as opposite to the ways of “the world” (cf. 1 Jn. 2:15-17; James 4:4). On other occasions the authors of the NT specifically refer to a clash between Christian and Greek ideas. In 1 Cor. 1:18-2:13, for example, Paul contrasts “the word of the cross” with the “wisdom of this age.” By the “word of the cross” Paul means preaching Christ’s death as the only atonement for man’s sins. Only those who repent and trust Christ as Savior and Lord will be redeemed. How different from “the wisdom of the world,” the vain attempts by Greek “wise men,” “scribes,” and “debaters,” to find paths to salvation based on human wisdom. Explicitly Paul states that “Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 1:23).<sup>11</sup>

Thus, we find ourselves talking about biblical doctrine, or truth that conflicts with the ways and the wisdom of the world.

With these acknowledgments in mind, I will argue that we must present the truth about Jesus around the themes of his past, completed work—his incarnation, his life and ministry, his death and resurrection; and his ongoing and future work—his continuing priestly ministry and his eventual return.

I will also argue that the heart of the gospel is the doctrine of justification, which answers the question, “How can a sinful human being be made right in the sight of holy God?” In speaking about the atonement, the missionary announces a number of truths (Christ as victor over the forces of evil, the eventual redemption of the whole creation, etc.). Ultimately, however, he will address this question, and the answer given will be essentially a judicial answer. If Tom Schreiner is correct, and I believe he is, the penal aspect of Jesus’

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<sup>10</sup>Ronald H. Nash, *World Views in Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 12.

<sup>11</sup>Andrew Hoffercker, et al., *Building a Christian World View*, 2 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1986) 2:73.

work is primary for understanding the gospel.<sup>12</sup> Believers are made right before God because their sins – “not in part, but the whole”<sup>13</sup> – have been laid on Christ, nailed to the cross, and they bear them no more. In turn, Christ’s righteousness has been given to those same believers, an imputed righteousness that is full and complete, so that as believers we stand before the Judge of heaven with no charge laid against us. But, to that discussion in just a few moments.

### **Jesus’ Incarnation**

The doctrine of the incarnation tells us that Jesus came in the flesh. This biblical teaching, however, signifies much more, i.e., we understand that Jesus was God come in the flesh. In it’s own way, the incarnation addresses the uniqueness of Jesus.

Of course, not all who claim the name of Jesus affirm the reality or the necessity of the incarnation. In a book that is well-known to many of you, John Hick and others have argued that the biblical teaching regarding the incarnation is not to be taken literally.<sup>14</sup> Though Jesus certainly possessed a keen and extraordinary “God-consciousness,” he himself never claimed to be divine. This not being a paper specifically on the incarnation, however, I will not venture into debating the issue. I accept that “Christ is the eternal Son of God. In His incarnation as Jesus Christ He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.”<sup>15</sup>

However, in thinking about missions, a number of problematic understandings about

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<sup>12</sup>Tom Schreiner, “Penal Substitution as the Heart of Atonement,” Faculty address, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, September 7, 2005.

<sup>13</sup>Horatio Spafford, “It Is Well With My Soul.”

<sup>14</sup>John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977).

<sup>15</sup>*The Baptist Faith and Message.*

Jesus' birth and incarnation come to mind (my list is by no means exhaustive): Jesus is merely human (see above). Jesus is one manifestation of God among many. Edward Schroeder explains the pluralistic position: "Jesus is one way up the mountain; there are many other ways going up there, and they get you to the top, too."<sup>16</sup>

Some will emphasize "incarnational missions." We often hear that, as his disciples, we are "Jesus' hands and feet." Indeed, we are his ambassadors, his messengers, his preachers, his witnesses, and yes, in a certain sense, his hands and feet. But, we must proceed cautiously here. In the April 1988 World Council of Churches consultation at Neapolis, Greece, Bishop Anastasios stated, "The most crucial point in mission is not what one announces, but what one lives, what one *is*."<sup>17</sup>

Actually, we need to think a bit about this statement. We can lose the real significance of the incarnation if, with extreme subjectivity, we so personalize it simply to refer to the fact that we represent another, or that we demonstrate the love of another, or that we carry out the ministry of another.

"The only Jesus someone might see is you. . . ." How dreadfully awful! Imagine that the only Jesus people see is George Martin with all his flaws, faults, and sins! How hopeless they will be because they do not see Jesus as he truly is in all his perfections. In him alone "all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form" (Col 2:9).

Though she and I approach these matters from different theological viewpoints, and though we would undoubtedly make different applications from the statement, I can agree

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<sup>16</sup>Edward H. Schroeder, "Pluralism's Question to Christian Missions: Why Jesus at All?" *Currents in Theology and Mission* 26 (June 1999):165.

<sup>17</sup>Anastasios of Androussa, "Orthodox Mission—Past, Present, Future," in *Your Will Be Done: Orthodoxy in Mission*, ed. George Lemopoulos (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1988), 88. Quoted in Norman E. Thomas, ed., *Classic Texts in Mission & World Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 120.

with Mother Teresa's observation: "If you give to the people a broken Christ, a lame Christ, a crooked Christ—deformed by you, that is all they will have."<sup>18</sup> We do not offer to the nations of the world a Christ in our image. Nor do we offer ourselves. Rather, we offer Christ himself!

Yes, "we have this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Cor 4:7), but we do have this treasure, whatever the container might be! And we have the responsibility to share this treasure with others. But we must never forget that, ultimately, it is the treasure that we share, not ourselves. Samuel Ruiz Garcia's statement – "The Church's mission is to perpetuate Christ's incarnation - to be 'made flesh' in terms of human life and culture, leading to the full humanization of men within a pluralism of persons and cultures."<sup>19</sup> – though made in the context of a seemingly sincere and legitimate attempt to discover how to contextualize the gospel, can be terribly and dangerously applied.

Christ's incarnation is unique. "It is precisely this uniqueness of Christ which gives him an absolute and universal significance."<sup>20</sup> Though a great theological gulf stands between the Roman Catholic Pope and me, I find his affirmation regarding Christ, rightly applied, to be eloquent and clear. We can no more perpetuate Christ's incarnation, i.e., preserve and continue in the world the physical presence of God the Son, than we can turn Brad Waggoner and Mary Mohler into Oklahoma Sooners fans, or myself into a Florida Gators fan! But we can say to the nations that God has come in the flesh!

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<sup>18</sup>Mother Teresa, *Total Surrender*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1995), 142,43.

<sup>19</sup>Samuel Ruiz Garcia, "The Incarnation of the Church in Indigenous Cultures," *Missiology* 1 (April 1973): 21.

<sup>20</sup>John Paul II, *Mission of the Redeemer, Redemptoris Missio*, 7 December 1990 [online]; accessed 16 February 2006; available from [http://www.christlife.org/evangelization/paul2/C\\_redemptorissmissio.html](http://www.christlife.org/evangelization/paul2/C_redemptorissmissio.html) .

## **Jesus' Life and Ministry**

Any accurate biography of Jesus will relate how Jesus lived in complete obedience to his father, thus establishing himself as a lamb without sin or blemish, an acceptable sacrifice (Heb 9:14). That same biography will also picture Jesus as a shepherd who cares for and ministers to his sheep. He fed the hungry. He gave drink to the thirsty. He went about Galilee and Judea healing those who were sick. He raised the dead to life. He delivered from demon possession those who were in bondage. He wept over Jerusalem.

Here is the servant of the Lord, who is gentle, who will not break a bruised reed (Is 42:2). He will establish justice in the earth (Is 42:3,4). He shepherds his people (Matt 2:6). He says to the hurting, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt 1:28-30).

To those who live their lives out of animistic worldviews that cause them to tremble because of the spirits, here is comfort and safety. Eugene Nida and William Smalley have noted the fear that so dominates the lives of many animists. Furthermore, they have observed that folk religions, with their magical practices (spells, fetishes, etc.) and special religious functionaries (shamans, witch doctors, dukuns), "do tend to help men adjust to the universe by giving them some sense of control, thus eliminating certain elements of fear, [however] they do not actually solve this problem of meeting life's crises."<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, the fear of spirits and powers so strong in animistic contexts "is no competition to trust in a loving,

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<sup>21</sup>Eugene A. Nida and William A. Smalley, *Introducing Animism* (New York: Friendship Press, 1959), 58.

heavenly Father.”<sup>22</sup>

To the animist, who constantly fears the malevolent powers inhabiting the physical universe, the life and ministry of Jesus can be presented, how he went about doing good and delivering people from evil spirits and bondage. As I have heard somewhere, to those who fear the spirits, “Jesus must be presented as Lord of life, able to free us from fear and bondage to all other spiritual forces and able to empower us to live a life pleasing to him.” We will re-visit the animist in a few moments.

### **Jesus’ Death and Resurrection**

Charles Spurgeon observed: “Leave out the cross, and you have killed the religion of Jesus. Atonement by the blood of Jesus is not an arm of Christian truth; it is the heart of it.”<sup>23</sup> Edward Schroeder has applauded Claus Westermann’s “insight into Hebrew anthropology so evident in the Psalms,”<sup>24</sup> insight that focuses on three foundational relationships: 1) relationship to others, 2) relationship to self, and 3) relationship to God.

Though addressing each of these relationships, the Christian gospel seems to focus on the third. Yes, from the beginning, God has been concerned about humans’ relationships to one another. In fact, a majority (six out of ten) of the commandments in the Decalogue deal with human relationships. Much of the Covenant Code (Ex 20:22-23:33) addresses the manner in which individual Israelites were to relate to one another. Our Lord himself called us to love one another and even to love our enemies. These themes remain prominent in the New Testament books that follow the gospels.

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>“Exploring the Mind and Heart of the Prince of Preachers” [on-line]; accessed 16 February 2006; available from [http://www.spurgeon.us/mind\\_and\\_heart/quotes/c4.htm#cross](http://www.spurgeon.us/mind_and_heart/quotes/c4.htm#cross).

<sup>24</sup>Schroeder, “Pluralism’s Question to Christian Missions,” 168.

Also, God desires that we evidence a right relationship in regard to ourselves. Negatively, we should not be lovers of self (2Tim 3:2). Positively, we are to put on the new self (Eph 4:24). Furthermore, we are to have this attitude within ourselves, i.e., that of Jesus, who looked out not only for his own interests but also the interests of others (Phil 2:5).

But of chief importance for the gospel is the God-ward relationship. The angel announced to Joseph that Mary would have a child, and that he was to be called “Jesus” (Matt 1:21). In Jewish tradition, the naming of a child was an important matter. The name was given to signify the chief characteristic either hoped for or realized in the life of the child. In fact, F. F. Bruce has observed, “In the faith and thought of virtually *every nation* the name is inextricably bound up with the person.”<sup>25</sup>

Matthew’s emphasis is clear. The child of Mary and Joseph would be called “Jesus” because he would save his people from their sin, sin which had separated them from God. No doubt, this savior will accomplish much. He will heal. After all, one title given to him is “physician” (Matt 9:12; Mk 2:7; Lk 4:23, 5:31). He will provide comfort and counsel. After all, he is “wonderful counselor” (Isa 9:6). He delights in providing for his people. After all, he owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Ps 50:10), and he delights to show himself strong on behalf of his people (Ps 68:28). He brings abundant life (John 10:10). He feeds the hungry, gives drink to the thirsty, is a father to the orphan and a husband to the widow. He rules over the nations (Ps 2). He is victor over the forces of darkness (Col 2:15, Rev 15:2).

The missionary delivers these messages and more. Everywhere he goes he discovers needs. But he knows the one in whom the promises of God are fulfilled (2 Cor 1:20), and to

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<sup>25</sup>F. F. Bruce, “Name,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* 3 vols., Colin Brown, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency, 1976), 2:648. Italics used for emphasis.

this one he invites all to come. Everywhere the missionary goes he comes face to face with perceived needs that, in actuality, are real needs. He encounters people who are hungry and thirsty, and he knows that Jesus would have him give them food and drink. He comes across those who are wounded, physically and spiritually, and he knows that Jesus would have him bind up those wounds. He sees broken relationships, and he knows he must bring to Jesus those estranged from one another. He understands the damage that unjust social and political structures do to people, and he cries out to Jesus to establish justice in the earth. The missionary is pleased if solutions are provided for these problems. But, he understands that a more ultimate need exists, i.e., the need for reconciliation between sinners and God.

A number of years ago, I was involved in a meeting in which missionaries were asking the question, “What is the most effective strategy for evangelizing animists?” Some answered that Jesus should not be offered to the animist as the savior of sinners. These pointed out that the animist does not perceive God in the same way that the Christian does, nor does he seek the forgiveness of sin. Rather, the animist primarily perceives that he needs to be protected from the malevolent spirits that inhabit the physical world. Thus, it was argued, we should not present Jesus to animists as the savior of sinners, but as the one who can protect them from the evil spirits.

The question naturally arises, “Can we be confident that the animist who comes to Jesus solely for the purpose of being delivered from the evil spirits is in a saving relationship through Jesus Christ?” We must think carefully about this matter. Remember that Jesus had a lot to say about meeting perceived needs, which often are real needs. We can even step away for a moment from our animistic setting and pose the following questions about our own context.

Can Jesus meet a financial need? Yes! In fact, some here this morning could testify concerning his faithfulness in meeting those needs in their families. Can Jesus patch up a broken marriage? Yes! In fact, as a pastor, I never hesitated to direct married couples to Jesus. The marriage that is falling apart, if it is to be all that it can and should be, must be centered upon Jesus Christ. Can Jesus heal? Of course! The physicians have done all they can do. They have called the family to the bedside in order to await the end. Even in those moments, though, we often will find ourselves praying that the Lord will heal the loved one. We do so because we know that he is able to heal, and that he delights to show himself strong on behalf of his people.

Can Jesus protect the animist from the malevolent spirits and demons? We must answer this question in the affirmative, also. We can explain to the animist that, whatever is out there, this Jesus has created it, he rules over it, and he is able to protect his people from it. In the final analysis, Jesus can meet every need of his people. No need is too small or too great. He is concerned about all of life, and he would have us direct others to rest in his sufficiency. But all these things, as I have sometimes explained to my students, fall into the category of what I call “all those other things.”

Jesus has come to save his people from their sins. And having addressed other needs, the missionary will find himself ultimately coming back to this need. We must never forget this message or relegate it to a place of secondary importance. I once heard a missionary testify that he had grown up in a conservative evangelical church where the doctrine of justification was emphasized. He explained that, during his first years on the international field, though his preaching focused on the need for sinners to be justified before a holy God, he never saw many come to Christ. When he learned that people in the host culture were

more concerned about abundant life in the present, he began to preach about the abundant life that Jesus offers. With that change in strategy came a huge turn-around with many “decisions” being made.

The strategy employed in the illustration seems to be that of discovering the felt needs of a particular people or culture, then announcing that Jesus came to deliver the people from those needs. This strategy sounds suspiciously like that taken in the evangelistic tract, *How to Have a Good Life*, published, by the way, by our own Southern Baptist Home Mission Board in the 80s. Apparently, the tract was written to address the issues of personal worth and happiness in a “personal happiness” culture. And though the tract references texts such as Romans 3:23 and 6:23, it leaves the discerning reader wondering if Jesus came only to save us from personal burdens and disappointments. But, again, if Tom Schreiner is correct, i.e., that penal substitution is the heart of the atonement, we do not have the option of addressing only culturally conditioned concerns.

Priscilla Pope-Levison and her husband, John, have written *Jesus in Global Contexts*<sup>26</sup> in which they present portraits of Jesus, or “contextual Christologies,”<sup>27</sup> from different cultural perspectives. From Latin America, Jesus is the one who brings political and economic liberation. From Asia, Jesus is presented as the cosmic Christ who is present in and who can be found in nature and in non-Christian religions. In Africa, Jesus is seen as the ancestor who liberates people from oppressive societal structures. The North American Jesus breaks down the forces of domination, with particular reference to male/female and black/white paradigms.

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<sup>26</sup>Priscilla Pope-Levison and John R. Levison, *Jesus in Global Contexts* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

A common theme emerges. All the Christologies presented by the Levisons “emerge from contexts that are defined by suffering.”<sup>28</sup> These sufferings are present in today’s world. But, as we have seen, Jesus has come to deliver his people from a much more dangerous predicament than mere political oppression or physical want.

The book *Mission as ‘Transformation’: A Theology of the Whole Gospel*—a collection of reflections from missionaries working with the poor around the world—purports to describe “the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world.”<sup>29</sup> A quick perusal of the table of contents, however, leaves one wondering, “Is the whole gospel really presented here?” Consider the following representative list of issues taken from the chapter headings: Social concern, Eschatology and ethics, Transformation, The poor, Human need, Modernity, Economics, Environment, Relief and development, Children at risk, Disability, Politics, Church and state, and Freedom and justice. Even in the lone chapter on evangelism, though a call to faith in Christ is issued, the reader is left wishing for a fuller explication of the gospel.

I would like to insert a personal comment at this point. I believe, along with the Levisons and Samuel and Sugden, that our God is deeply concerned about human suffering in all its forms and manifestations. Furthermore, I believe that our God is actively involved in his creation as the one who comes to the rescue of the poor and the needy. I believe that Jesus offers, not only eternal life, but also abundant life in the present. I believe that the missionary should announce these truths to all he encounters. But, I also believe that the heart of the gospel lies elsewhere. With Donald Carson, I will always ask, “Is the cross the

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 184.

<sup>29</sup>Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, eds., *Mission as ‘Transformation’: A Theology of the Whole Gospel* (Oxford, UK: Regnum Books International). From the jacket.

center of your ministry?”<sup>30</sup>

Along with a group of twelve seminary students, I was returning to Chicago on an El Al flight from Tel Aviv, Israel. On the plane was a considerable number of orthodox Jews. At one point, the adult males slipped into their religious garb and made their way to the back of the airplane in order to carry out their religious duties. One of our students engaged a young man, probably in his early twenties, in conversation. This young Israeli offered an amazing observation to Doug: “I understand why no one wishes to convert to Judaism. The rules! The regulations!” To those in every culture who attempt to justify themselves through asceticism, pilgrimages and works of all sorts, here is the good news that another has accomplished what they cannot.

### **Jesus’ Ascension, Continuing Ministry and Eventual Return**

The ascension of Jesus transitions our thoughts from Jesus’ completed, earthly ministry to his ongoing and future work. Unlike human priests, who were prevented by death from continuing, Jesus “continues forever.” He “holds His priesthood permanently. Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb 9:23-25).

Modalism is a significant problem in contexts where Christians are likely to be accused of being polytheistic or tri-theistic, that is, believing in three gods. Anecdotally speaking, I have heard even Christian leaders explain, “Oh, we do not really believe in three gods, rather, that throughout history God has at different times revealed himself in different ways.” Of course, such a modalistic understanding of the Trinity is not only false, it also

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<sup>30</sup>D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from I Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), from the book jacket.

deprives the believer of the wonderfully comforting truth that God is always Trinitarian.

Though we could make several observations and applications at this point, consider the continuing priestly ministry of Jesus from a modalistic perspective. According to this understanding, at any given moment, God exists in only one mode. The consequence of God presently existing, for example, as the Holy Spirit, is that he cannot, at the same moment, exist as the Son. Consequently, while God is in his Spirit mode, the ongoing intercessory ministry of the Son at the right hand of the Father is lost to the believer.

God, however, always has been, and always will be Father, Son and Spirit. To those who live their entire lives in the context of persecution, poverty and suffering, here is the assurance that Jesus continues to care. And, not only does he continue to care, but one day he will return victoriously to gather to himself for all eternity those who are his.

### **Conclusion**

I was once in a ministry context in which several colleagues attempted to introduce into the work the strategy of “power evangelism.” Power evangelism proponents argue that the preaching of the gospel, particularly in certain cultures, must be preceded by “power encounters.” These encounters between the God of the Bible and the people’s supposed gods will demonstrate that our God is supremely powerful. Furthermore, these demonstrations of power are used in an attempt to validate the gospel message.

I fear, though, that such an approach betrays a lack of confidence in the message of the gospel itself. In fact, many in this world will never accept the truth of the gospel, no matter how many miracles or signs and wonders they witness. The cross will always seem foolish to the world, “but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18). We must never be ashamed of the gospel, “for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone

who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom 1:16).

Our time has expired. Let me quickly summarize and make application. As ministers of the gospel, we are given the essential task of testifying to the person and work of Jesus Christ. That testimony, though given in different languages and illustrated in many different manners across cultures, must be consistent. We must talk about Jesus’ incarnation, his life and ministry, his death and resurrection, his ascension and his eventual return. We testify of these things and promote these truths, not simply in an impassioned, dutiful manner (what I would call a “Joe Friday” manner, i.e., “Just the facts, mam, just the facts.”), or merely from a sense of obligation. Rather, we do so because we understand that these truths offer hope, the only hope, for people in every place and in every generation.