

## ***COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL TO A BIBLICALLY ILLITERATE CULTURE***

**“I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar.” -- Nietzsche**

A young thirty-three-year old Spanish-speaking woman attends and actively participates in an inner-city AWANA Crosstrainers Club with which I work.<sup>1</sup> Aside from the curiosity of her motivation – the club is designed for elementary age children – one marvels at her involvement (even in games) in light of problems in communication. She can speak Spanish fluently, but her improving English is somewhat broken. I was not a little chagrined when I presented her with a Spanish copy of the New Testament. She was functionally illiterate with respect to reading Spanish as well as English! On top of this is her heritage of nominal Catholicism and the impoverished knowledge of the Bible that comes with it. She possesses absolutely no framework of biblical knowledge that could help her relate one part of an expository sermon with another part or with any other theological truth. My heart goes out to such people. This woman is an unbeliever who needs to understand and heed the good news that Jesus Christ has died for her sins, has been buried, and has risen from the dead so that she can walk with new life in Christ. She probably cannot understand the meaning of the words of the previous sentence, even if she understood the individual words themselves. This is the dilemma facing the American evangelical community today. The gospel message has become like a slogan for a television commercial that has 50 or more seemingly disconnected video screens within 20 seconds.

### **The Problems Which Cause or Aggravate the Dilemma**

#### **Various Forms of Illiteracy**

Ronald Nash, in his controversial book *The Closing of the American Heart*, has suggested that there are three kinds of illiteracy.<sup>2</sup> The first kind is generally called **functional illiteracy**. “To be functionally illiterate is to fall short of what we typically regard as the minimal level of competence with regard to such basic functions as reading, writing, and mathematics.”<sup>3</sup> Much of Nash’s discussion here is taken up with distressing

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<sup>1</sup> This inner city AWANA club is part of an inner city church planting ministry named Mission Scranton (for Scranton, PA) which is itself an outreach ministry of Heritage Baptist Church in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Nash, *The Closing of the American Heart: What’s Really Wrong with America’s Schools*, (Probe Books, 1990), 45-59.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

illustrations of the present educational scene.<sup>4</sup> Thirteen percent of American seventeen-year-olds are said to be functionally illiterate. If the survey is limited to minorities, the number skyrockets to forty percent. Some estimates leave us with 24 million functionally illiterate citizens in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

While mathematics plays an important role in any person's life (whether he knows it or not), the other two areas of reading and writing affect directly the issue before us of communicating the gospel. Printed materials or handouts in Sunday School classes are of little value to those who are functionally illiterate. When the pastor mentions on Sunday morning "to turn to Matthew's Gospel," not only will a lack of basic biblical knowledge make the functionally illiterate person uncomfortable, but even if a friend helped him find Matthew, he cannot follow along. Phrases from the pastor such as "look at verse 3," "read along with me," and "what does the next phrase say?" are all typical expressions of an evangelical pastor teaching a functionally literate middle class church. However, to those who have not obtained that level of basic skills, such statements may be, at best, useless. At the worst, they may embarrass someone to the point of causing rejection of the one sharing the message. Such a state of affairs has serious implications for discipleship as well as evangelism methods. The functionally illiterate believer cannot go home and reread the text and do follow up on his own as a worshipful response to what his pastor has just told him. This may have ramifications for the action of the Church if it seriously wants to reach and teach such people in obedience to the great commission. Unfortunately, many find the solution for their churches by retreating into a comfortable zone of ministry designed for a moderately educated middle class white American congregation.

**Cultural illiteracy** constitutes the second kind of illiteracy propounded by Nash. "To be culturally illiterate is to be deficient in one's understanding of the basic terms and concepts that a person needs to function properly in our society."<sup>6</sup> The issue here is not basic skills like reading and writing. It is *basic knowledge*. Nash points us to the significant work of E. D. Hirsch, including his list of five thousand essential names, phrases, dates, and concepts that every culturally literate American knows or should know.<sup>7</sup> This knowledge helps form an intellectual framework that must be present so that the person can function successfully in the culture.

The recently rediscovered insight that literacy is more than a skill is based upon knowledge that all of us unconsciously have about language. We know instinctively that to understand what

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<sup>4</sup> There is no lack of books on the subject of functional illiteracy over the last thirty years or so. A random sampling pertinent to my own interests in inner city ministry would be William F. White, *Tactics for Teaching the Disadvantaged*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1971), Deborah Elkins and Hilda Taba, *Teaching Strategies for the Culturally Disadvantaged*, (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1966), James A. Banks, ed., *Education in the 80's: Multiethnic Education*, (Washington, D. C.: National Education Association, 1981), Joseph O. Loretan and Shelley Umans, *Teaching the Disadvantaged: New Curriculum Approaches*, (Columbia University: Teacher's College Press, 1966). It seems to me that most of the strategies that have been designed have failed in some way. There continues to be as much argument about the state, cause, and cure of functional illiteracy as there ever has been.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 45-46.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>7</sup> E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

somebody is saying, we must understand more than the surface meanings of words; we have to understand the context as well. The need for background information applies all the more to reading and writing. To grasp the words on a page we have to know a lot of information that isn't set down on the page.<sup>8</sup>

The same concern lies at the heart of Allan Bloom's complaint in *The Closing of the American Mind*. The idea of great books, that is, a heritage of literature (as well as other things like music) has been done away with in our modern American culture. Bloom notes that

The contents of the classic books have become particularly difficult to defend in modern times, and the professors who now teach them do not care to defend them, are not interested in their truth. One can most clearly see the latter in the case of the Bible. To include it in the humanities is already a blasphemy, a denial of its own claims. There it is almost inevitably treated in one of two ways: It is subjected to modern "scientific" analysis, called the Higher Criticism, where it is dismantled, to show how "sacred" books are put together, and that they are not what they claim to be. It is useful as a mosaic in which one finds the footprints of many dead civilizations. Or else the Bible is used in courses in comparative religion as one expression of the need for the "sacred" and as a contribution to the very modern, very scientific study of the structure of "myths" . . . A teacher who treated the Bible naively, taking it at its word, or Word, would be accused of scientific incompetence and lack of sophistication.<sup>9</sup>

Bloom laments the fact that culture, at large especially as it is affected at the university level, fights against the dissemination of the basic knowledge that has formed the background grid for living life in Western Civilization. *In this sense, biblical illiteracy would be simply one area of overall cultural illiteracy.*

Without the overall framework of working ideas that constitute the nation's heritage, it is uncertain that any person could fully comprehend all that is communicated especially in a conservative church setting. I found this out last summer when I taught an adult Bible study class during the July 4 weekend. My topic was the possible biblical basis for each of the ten amendments in the Bill of Rights. The large amount of ignorance about some basic concepts important to the workings of our Republic shocked both my American and evangelical sensitivities.

The rapidly growing deficiency in basic knowledge in our culture demonstrates that the language of tradition has lost its value. We have no national tradition; or better, we have a disintegrating tradition that presently casts itself according to several fragmentary centers of thought. The cacophony of ideas which expresses the multitude of competing viewpoints mirrors the image we previously mentioned concerning vast numbers of video screens being displayed in a short commercial. In the end there is no deep well of basic knowledge which assists the thinking patterns of those who listen to us.

What has this to do with preaching the gospel? The preaching in many pockets of evangelicalism is not expository. As such, it tends to be fragmentary, speaker-driven

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 3. See also William J. Bennett, "Moral Literacy and the Formation of Character," *Faculty Dialogue* 8 (Spring/Summer 1987), 24.

<sup>9</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1987), 374.

rather than text-driven, and therefore just like the surrounding culture. It may be that, in this case, the gospel comes across like just one of the competing noises which the audience digests each week. However, the more desirable style of expository preaching needs to be examined as well. Most expositors assume that their congregational members, on the average, have some deftness about them as to their intellectual capacities. It is assumed that they can follow and think through the points and connections being made. But if the idea of cultural illiteracy is accurate, then the expositor is going to be faced with a growing problem of the lack of basic knowledge which might hinder even illustrations from being understood.

Nash's third type of illiteracy is **moral illiteracy**. Here the issue is the existence of the culture wars which political conservatives mention and political liberals sometimes downplay. Needless to say, it appears on most fronts that the conservatives have lost the culture, if they ever had it. The impact that this has on the preaching of the gospel and all biblical truth can not be ignored. For example, it is hard for many in our churches to understand the pastor's overly strict view on divorce and remarriage. In the pastor's mind, he is expositing a revealed text. In the minds of the people, even believers, he is liable to be viewed as cranky and judgmental. This antinomian spirit of the age increases the counseling load of pastors as church members seek to unravel the messes they have created. However, in terms of preaching the gospel of eternal life, one must note the hardened nature of a culture which increasingly has a hard time understanding what the concept of sin really means. If it cannot come to grips with the fact that there is a problem, what use is a solution? In short, the moral bankruptcy of our day leaves us in the midst of people who do not know that they are blind and lost.

Nash also uses such phrases as **theological illiteracy**, **theological agnosticism**, and **theological apostasy** to describe various facets of the present situation as it pertains to the more narrow issue of evangelical culture and education.<sup>10</sup> The bleak picture he paints, in general, demonstrates that various forms of illiteracy, whether functional, cultural, or moral, aggravate the dilemma faced by the Christian who wants to communicate the gospel to a culture that is increasingly deficient in its understanding and practice of the basic content of the Bible.

### **The Rise of Postmodernism**

Postmodernism has gotten quite a bit of press coverage the last few years and rightly so. The change from a modernistic culture to a postmodern world has perhaps caught the Church off guard. At least under a modernistic culture everybody seemed to believe that some measure of absolute truth existed – they only argued about who had it. Postmodern thinking (which is somewhat dependent upon modernism) seems to declare that there is no such thing as truth.

There are some good things that could be said about postmodern developments. On the scientific front, Newtonian mechanics in the hands of modernists tended to use predictability in nature to eliminate the category of miracles. The more random facts of the New Physics, which is compatible with postmodern subjectivity and uncertainty,

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<sup>10</sup> Nash, 177-88.

seems to open the door of (at least) discussion about the supernatural and miracles in one form or another.<sup>11</sup> At the very least we can see perhaps an overthrow of naked secularism: On a positive note, William E. Brown observes that “the demise of modernism in its many forms foreshadows hope for the future. The tyranny of secular thinking, once overthrown, can only provide greater opportunities for the message of Christ.”<sup>12</sup>

However, on the other side is the relativism and pluralism of postmodernism which appears to go hand in hand with biblical illiteracy.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the entire enterprise of history becomes suspect in postmodern thinking. Relativism and pluralism have no use for a clear, objective view of what has happened. Yet the Bible is a document rooted and grounded in history with the truth claims of Christianity dependent upon objective historical claims such as the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>14</sup> We will not belabor the points here since they are so well documented elsewhere.

What needs to be noted is that postmodernism may be the engine driving us to increasing levels of biblical illiteracy. It may do this somewhat by giving a philosophical basis for removing any motivation. If there is no truth, why pursue a written text like the Scriptures? Notice what I am not saying. It is not that postmodernism is the original cause of biblical illiteracy. There are too many cultural factors involved for such a simplistic analysis. For example, Western culture’s indulgence in materialism has much to do with the lack of motivation to pursue biblical knowledge and holiness. However, postmodernism’s underpinnings may, in the end, encourage faster development of the tendency toward biblical illiteracy.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Rise of Video Culture**

Here, I am not simply critiquing American indulgence in MTV or Blockbuster Video. Instead I am being drawn back to the intriguing presentation by Neil Postman in his short, but provocative, critique entitled *Amusing Ourselves to Death* which he gave

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<sup>11</sup> For example discussions, see Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983) and Ian G. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

<sup>12</sup> William E. Brown, “Theology in a Postmodern Culture: Implications of a Video-Dependent Society” in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* edited by David S. Dockery, (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> See D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 42-44. He accuses postmodern thinking of rampant biblical illiteracy that needs to be overcome.

<sup>14</sup> For a helpful discussion of the historical issues, see Ronald H. Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984).

<sup>15</sup> It could perhaps be argued that absence of biblical knowledge has led the present culture down the postmodern trail rather than the other way around. However, in light of the multiplication of factors such as hedonism (mentioned above), at best one can say that there is a reciprocal relationship between the two. The comments above only serve to warn about postmodernism’s side of the relationship. If biblical illiteracy can be compared to gasoline on the ground, then postmodernism might be the match which sets it on fire as time progresses.

us nearly fifteen years ago.<sup>16</sup> Postman's thesis is that it is not entirely good that our culture has moved from learning based upon the printed page to learning based upon video technology. Application of this technology shift complicates the work of a Church that believes that God has given us a written Word on printed page in space and time. The loss of interest in meditative lifestyles may reflect this transition or it might be intensified by it. Yet the meditative lifestyle is part of one's growing fellowship with God.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the Church must come to grips with the video elements in our culture and how they affect our thinking.

These are not trivial matters, but they are only a small part of the way in which I define technology education. As I see it, the subject is mainly about how television and movie cameras, Xerox machines, and computers reorder our psychic habits, our social relations, our political ideas, and our moral sensibilities. It is about how the meanings of information and education change as new technologies intrude upon a culture, how the meanings of truth, law, and intelligence differ among oral cultures, writing cultures, printing cultures, electronic cultures.<sup>18</sup>

Postman is not saying that we should warn people about the dangers of technology as part of a naïve anti-technology stance. He goes on to clarify that

technology education does not imply a negative attitude toward technology. It does imply a critical attitude. To be "against technology" makes no more sense than to be "against food." We can't live without either. But to observe that it is dangerous to eat too much food, or to eat food that has no nutritional value, is not to be "antifood." It is to suggest what may be the best uses of food. Technology education aims at students' learning about what technology helps us to do and what it hinders us from doing; it is about how technology uses us, for good or ill, and about how it has used people in the past, for good or ill. It is about how technology creates new worlds, for good or ill.<sup>19</sup>

If Postman is right -- and I have no reason to dispute him entirely, although various areas may be open to debate -- the ramifications of the shift to a video culture for communicating the truth of the gospel and the Bible are enormously significant. One corrective for a biblically illiterate culture on the face of it is at least communication of Bible content. Yet, many of the communication forms of the Church are writing/printing forms of communication. But the culture is moving away from a printed material learning model. Could this aggravate the situation we find ourselves in with respect to biblical illiteracy? We must use new forms of communication or train listeners in the old forms.<sup>20</sup> We have no other choice before us. Otherwise, we may entertain a diminishing audience.

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<sup>16</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1985). See also, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, (New York, Dell Publishing Co., 1969).

<sup>17</sup> For example, note Psalm 1 among many other passages that could be cited.

<sup>18</sup> Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 191.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 191-92.

<sup>20</sup> Here the example of the early church as well as earlier Jewish experience is instructive. Although it would be easy to overestimate the illiteracy of earlier biblical times, it might be safe to say that truth endured apart from any literacy campaign. It seems that both writers (e.g., Matthew, John), and

### Brown echoes Postman's concerns:

In a practical sense, the thinking involved in watching television is radically different from that which is necessary in verbal communication (reading, speaking, listening). The gap between that which is visual and that which is verbal is profound, differing not only in degree but in kind . . . The result [of television viewing for children] is deficiency in the ability to read intelligently, communicate clearly, and reason morally. This lack of cognitive ability resulting from early video-dependency is strangely akin to the willful activities fostered by certain postmodern assumptions.

Moral arguments and epistemological considerations have no place in the world of television. True, false, good, bad are the stuff of language and ideas, not visual images. In a video-dependent society, moral decisions are emotive not rational, not based on reasons or principles but on existential ecstasy or terror. The result is an increasing inability to discuss significant issues in a meaningful way. Whereas political debates of the past were distinguished by cogent argumentation and sophisticated ideas, current debates are limited to two-minute responses and five-second sound bites.

The visual does not supplement language, it displaces it. Unlike reading which requires an enormous amount of intellectual participation, television traps the brain into a passive dependency.<sup>21</sup>

### Brown goes on to apply this to orthodox Christianity by noting

Moral and creative reasoning aside, the implications of devaluing verbal communication cut at the heart of a biblical worldview. God has chosen language as an integral mode of self-revelation. If the verbal is no longer important, where does that leave Scripture? The close tie between language and God is reflected by Nietzsche who complained, "I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar."<sup>22</sup>

Brown sees a hopeful response in teaching Christianity in its broadest terms and in focusing on the unifying dimension of Christ.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, the rise of the video culture becomes for the evangelical a complicating factor in trying to communicate the gospel to an audience that is not normally given over to the required thinking processes.

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characters (e.g., Mary and the Magnificat) of the New Testament show great depth of understanding of Old Testament passages and theology in spite of their relatively uneducated state in society. This means that in responding to the biblically illiterate culture of our day the Academy may have a harder time of adjustment than the Church at large. On the positive side, it means that our present missionaries along with the early testimony of Jewish and Christian oral traditions may be our most important examples for communicating the gospel to the biblically and functionally illiterate. I simply have not had the time to pursue research in this area at the present time. This seems to me to be a necessity. However, we must still deal with the technology side of the pre-conditioning of our present audience, something with which earlier times did not contend.

<sup>21</sup> Brown, 318-19.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 320-22.

## Some Proposals to Overcome the Dilemma

### Francis Schaeffer

Schaeffer's analysis of culture has always fascinated me. His insights were often ahead of the times and he could see what was coming long before many of us.<sup>24</sup> Although he did not deal with biblical illiteracy directly, he did talk much about communication of the gospel and biblical truth to twentieth-century Western culture in the midst of the many shifts we have alluded to above. So, in preparation for this discussion, I reviewed some of Schaeffer's thinking.

First, Schaeffer reminds us that **we must learn the language of the people we are trying to reach:**

If we wish to communicate, then we must take time and trouble to learn our hearers' use of language so that they understand what we intend to convey. This is particularly difficult today for a Christian, who wants to use a word like 'God' or 'guilt' in a strictly defined sense rather than as a connotation word, because the concepts of these words have universally been changed. In a case like this, either we must try to find a synonymous word without a false connotation, or else we have to define the word at length when we use it, so that we make sure our hearer understands as fully as possible what we are conveying. In this latter case we are no longer using the word as a technical word in the sense that we assume a common definition.<sup>25</sup>

Second, **we must talk to each non-Christian realizing who he or she actually is even though separated from God. In particular, each unbeliever possesses personality, is made in the image of God, and is a unit.**<sup>26</sup> The fact that someone possesses personality means that I must not communicate the gospel or biblical truth as if there is a mechanical formula that works for all people. Each person has been uniquely made by God. The fact that a lost person is still in the image of God means that I must value that person as one of "our kind" not as someone greatly inferior to myself.

Third, **Schaeffer tells us to point the unbeliever to the logical conclusions of his own presuppositions**, the consequences of his own world view on its own terms.<sup>27</sup> This is not a denial of the role of the Bible in witnessing. It is simply leading the unbeliever to the point of tension in his life. In other words, it is a demonstration that he has a need, perhaps one he does not perceive. Schaeffer would say that quoting Bible verses with the solutions of the gospel cannot come until a person really understands his need. Of course, he would incorporate much prayer and dependence upon the Spirit throughout the whole process. The approach is clearly summarized by Schaeffer in the following way:

Often it is necessary to take much more time to press him towards the logical conclusion of his position than it will later take to give him the answer. Luther spoke of the Law and the Gospel;

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<sup>24</sup> Of course, one of the reasons he was ahead of many of us was his L'Abri ministry in Europe where the advancing tendencies of postmodernism preceded those in North America.

<sup>25</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who is There*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 119-20.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-21.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-32.



and the Law, the need, must always be adequately clear first. Then one can give him the Christian answer because he knows his need for something; and one can tell him what his deadness really is, and **the solution in the total structure of truth**. But if we do not take sufficient time to take the roof off, the twentieth-century man will not comprehend what we are trying to communicate, either as to what his death is caused by, or the solution. We must never forget that the first part of the Gospel is not 'Accept Christ as Saviour', but '**God is there**'. Only then are we ready to hear God's solution for man's moral dilemma in the substitutionary work of Christ in history.<sup>28</sup>

In this quote, Schaeffer hints at two ideas which will be prominent in discussions of other proposals below. First, the beginning point of discussion with our present culture should not be the Cross of Christ. The starting line is the existence of God who is our Creator. Second, he speaks of the answer of the gospel as a solution that must be given in the context of the structure of all truth thereby opening up discussions concerning the plot line of the entire Bible. These ideas are not far from what Carson says, what many of our missionaries tell us, and, indeed, are not far from the Apostle Paul.

Although Schaeffer's analysis of culture was not centered around biblical illiteracy, his insights are especially appropriate for those who have no framework of biblical content to help them understand us when we speak. Starting at their point of need, many people can and do come to understand the solution in Jesus the Messiah and become open to the content of Scripture for their lives.

### **D. A. Carson**

Few have analyzed the present Western culture and American evangelicalism with as much detail as D. A. Carson in his monumental work *The Gagging of God*. His analysis of postmodern culture provides many invaluable insights for those wanting to communicate to a biblically illiterate culture trapped in its own relativism. His approach follows the same general framework as Schaeffer. For example, he acknowledges that in the gospel presentation to the culture one must often begin by boldly critiquing the intellectual, moral, and existential bankruptcy of those in our audience:

Recognized or not, acknowledged or not, there is a profound and bitter emptiness at the hearts of many men and women in Western culture. I am not therefore suggesting that the gospel be reshaped to become that which meets my emptiness: so crassly put, this would be one more way by which evangelicalism is only a whisker from affirming that God exists in order to meet my needs, as I perceive them. Human emptiness and moral confusion must be traced to its roots *in biblical theology*; only in that framework can the historic gospel truly address the underlying problem. Nevertheless, this is an important way into some people's minds and hearts. Not a few people are hungry to escape their isolation.<sup>29</sup>

A couple of points emerge from this comment, both of which are developed by Carson further in his work. First, there is a biblical framework that must be present even to correctly perceive the starting point of need in the unbeliever. But this framework has a beginning. Carson titles one section "In Our Evangelism We Must Start Further Back

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>29</sup> Carson, 495.

and Nail Down the Turning Points in Redemptive History.”<sup>30</sup> In this section he deals with Paul at Athens in Acts 17:16-31 and with the primacy of biblical theology. In Athens, Paul was facing a crowd similar to our own pluralistic, postmodern culture. They were, in Carson’s words, “utterly biblically illiterate.”<sup>31</sup> In my own reading of Acts 17, I see Paul as starting at a point of interest within the culture he was addressing in a way that shows he understood them, at least to a point. His preaching outline begins with the doctrine of Creation (like Schaeffer, Carson) but hits the other high points of repentance, judgment, and resurrection. There is somewhat of a framework in the plot line of the Bible that is presented by Paul in this situation.

This, surely, is part of the lesson of Acts 17. Paul felt it necessary to establish an entire framework, a framework very largely at odds with the various outlooks of paganism, if the gospel of Christ was to be understood and accepted on its own terms. If we have trouble coming to terms with this, it may be because “few Americans have been taught to think in terms of worldviews.” One begins to see the problem when one talks frankly with the rising generation of postmodern biblical illiterates.<sup>32</sup>

Both Carson and Schaeffer would also highlight how Christians live in the midst of the postmodern illiterates. It is not just the verbal proclamation that counts. But it seems to me that the major thrust of both is the communication of a larger biblical context which gives coherence to the entire gospel presentation.

### **Learning From Our Missionaries**

In one church I pastored, I committed the unpardonable sin. I moved the Wednesday mid-week prayer meeting to Thursday night for a thirteen week period. Even beyond that I moved it into a home of one of the church members rather than having it at the church building! It was not something quickly sprung on the church. The leadership worked it through for several weeks. I think in the end they thought I really would not do it. The negative feedback was enormous. A few weeks later a missionary to France made a presentation in which he said the culture in France, primarily the way schools were structured, forced him to have mid-week services on Thursdays. The “amens” rolled throughout the auditorium congratulating this missionary on his ability to exegete his culture and adjust to reach people. For our American church, only negative ideas were voiced even though my decision had added people to the church. Such a state of affairs highlights the need of our American churches to exegete our own culture, that is, understand its mindset and its language forms, so that we can act, minister, and teach in order to have maximum contact and maximum comprehension concerning what we say and do.

To put it another way, one administrative rule that church workers ought to obey constantly is “do not waste time by reinventing the wheel!” Many of our missionaries throughout history have already been forced to deal with the issue of a biblically illiterate

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 496.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 503.

culture in a foreign setting. What have they learned that could help us?<sup>33</sup> A couple of prominent illustrations are in order.

First, Don Richardson's famous use of the *Peace Child* concept is instructive.<sup>34</sup> Most of us have seen the movie about the Peace Child and know the story. Richardson tried to proclaim the gospel to the Sawi tribe in Netherlands New Guinea. Unfortunately, the people valued treachery so much that, after hearing the gospel account, they viewed Judas as a hero rather than Jesus. So much for biblical illiteracy! However, Richardson was able to get through to them by exegeting their culture. In their culture, the concept of a peace child, the son of tribal leaders swapped with one from another tribe, kept peace among warring factions. Richardson was able to use this concept, which was clearly understood in their own culture, as an analogy so the Sawi could comprehend the true meaning of the Cross of Jesus. Jesus was the Peace Child given by God so that the Sawi and God would not be at war with each other. This approach is similar to Schaeffer's emphasis on learning the culture and beginning where the people are, even if all particulars do not match Richardson's situation. The Peace Child does not present a rare example of how these things work as Charles Kraft shows:

What should a cross-cultural witness do when he discovers that presenting Satan as a dragon (Rev. 12) to Chinese results in their regarding him positively? Or presenting Jesus as the Good Shepherd (Ps. 23; Jn. 10) in parts of Africa results in their understanding him to be mentally incompetent? Or telling the story of Jesus' betrayal results in Judas being regarded as the hero . . . Or presenting Jesus as the Lamb of God (Jn. 1:29, 36) in parts of Indonesia, does not, for that audience, convey John's intent nearly so well as analogies concerning his sacrificial work springing from their use of pigs?<sup>35</sup>

A growing biblical illiteracy in the North American context may mean that we need to search for significant cultural analogies to give form to our language as we communicate the gospel.

The best missionary illustration and the most applicable to our own context may be the story of "EE-TAOW." Missionaries trying to reach the Mouk tribe in remote areas of Papua New Guinea had overwhelming numbers of conversions when they embarked upon a long term approach to sharing the gospel. Rather than starting with the Cross, they started with the Creator God who is there (like Schaeffer). The plot line of the Bible from Genesis to the Cross (like Carson) is developed over a period of months answering many cultural questions along the way. The end result is amazing comprehension of the gospel story. Americans, likewise, need to be given the full plot line of the Bible so that the truth of the gospel is placed in the larger context of the biblical theology which God has revealed.

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<sup>33</sup> Although I will not deal with it here, this should increase our interest in church history and historical theology. The history of the church has much to say about communicating the gospel to non-Christian cultures. It would make a significant contribution to the modern discussions here to see a study in this area.

<sup>34</sup> Don Richardson, *Peace Child*, (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1974). See also Richardson's *Eternity in Their Hearts*, (Revised ed., Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1984). I do not intend here to give a critical evaluation of Richardson's theories about various unreached people groups.

<sup>35</sup> Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 14.

## Some Final Recommendations

In this section, I want to list a few practical observations which I think are appropriate in light of the more theoretical discussions we have had to this point.

1. The use of **dramatic presentations**, which has increased in evangelical churches over the last twenty years, has value as a communicating “video” kind of medium which may help comprehension in the short run. However, for the long term, people need to be brought along the Bible’s plot line and taught how to read and interpret the Bible as a printed page medium.
2. It seems imperative that the American churches choose **modern English translations** that are fairly understandable while at the same time being accurate. The Reformation ideal of preaching the gospel in the language of the common people must be continued.
3. The way that **worship and music** is handled in a local church setting must be given added attention. Since music carries with it a worship/vertical dimension and a horizontal/teaching dimension (see Eph. 5 & Col. 3), music may be used to communicate the gospel and biblical truths when other forms of communications are incomprehensible to the culture. At the very least, music sometimes facilitates memory of various ideas that can be focused upon.
4. The churches need to design and use “**Walk Thru the Bible**” forums throughout the entire range of ministry options. By this I do not mean the formal ministry by that name. I mean one or two hour Sunday school classes giving the entire plot line of the Bible, preaching designed with this in mind, evangelism training focusing on this need, etc.
5. **The pastor’s preaching may need to be adjusted** in the light of the biblical illiteracy in the culture. Choice of passages becomes even more crucial. Carson had suggested Romans, Acts 17, Ephesians, the biblical covenants (Abrahamic, et al.), and others.<sup>36</sup> The significance of his illustrations as handles into discussions about the entire plot line of the Bible and the gospel message seems to escalate due to rising illiteracy. It may also be that the public invitation, properly used apart from manipulation, needs to be carefully crafted with these things in mind.
6. While the church and pastor make some adjustments, there still needs to be the **aggressive teaching of the Word** that may entail (1) the **teaching of reading** for the functionally illiterate, (2) the **teaching of hermeneutics**, that is, the teaching of how to read the Bible. Most churches assume everyone really knows how to read the text.

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<sup>36</sup> Carson, 503-05.

Along with what I am recommending is the obvious idea that we teach people how to **think biblically for themselves.**

7. **The use of gospel tracts may need to be modified.** Many of our tracts have been written with the assumption that the framework for the gospel is already present in the culture. Perhaps we need to write a host of new tracts with the plot line of the Bible in mind. At the very least we must make sure that the issue of Law (the need because of condemnation) is spelled out clearly. This is often missing from some of our gospel presentations.<sup>37</sup>

The following list yields discussion questions/areas related to each of the above categories.

#### The Use of Drama

- In Sunday School or Adult Bible Fellowships
- In special events
- Placed in the worship time prior to the sermon
- Placed in the sermon itself
- What about using “lost” people in the drama?
- What about special application to youth?

#### Modern English translations

- My preference for a study Bible is not the NIV but I do not see many other preferable choices
- What should we look for in a translation?
- Should we love the text more than people?

#### Worship and music styles and content

- Would variety be too confusing or necessary?
- Where do we draw the line in borrowing music & communication styles from the culture (e.g., rap music – if music is the right word for that!)
- Is there anything to avoid?
- Should we make church services more expressive?

#### “Walk through the Bible” Type Ministries

- Virtue oriented ministries of comprehensive scope
- The formal Walk Through the Bible Seminars – content oriented
- Local church based ministry doing the same things
- Where?
- How?

#### The Pastor’s Preaching

- Should he begin with application, illustration, or explanation?
- To what level should he share Greek and Hebrew backgrounds to the Bible?
- Should he put the text on the overhead?
- Should he put the text in the bulletin?
- Should the sermons be interrupted by drama, offerings, and other events to deal with attention span (the lack thereof)?
- How do you evaluate if you are getting through to them?

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<sup>37</sup> See also George Hunter, *How to Reach Secular People*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1992) and Robert Don Huges, *Talking to the World in the Days to Come*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1991).

- How can his preaching be reinforced throughout the other activities of the church?

#### The Teaching of Reading

- English as a second language
- How?
- When?
- Where?
- Why?
- Can a non-reader be a spiritual Christian?
- Can we supplement reading with pictorial presentations?

#### The Teaching of How to Read a Text

- Do you know what hermeneutics refers to?
- Do you know the rules of hermeneutics?
- Is it necessary to teach these rules?
- What benefit do these rules have for someone who does not read well?
- Do you know how to read a text of the Bible?
- How do we balance indoctrination with teaching people to think on their own?

#### The Teaching of How to Listen to a Text

- How do we point visual and auditory teaching to the written text?
- Apply to drama
- Apply to music
- Apply to youth groups
- When you are listening or watching, how are you confronted with the actual text of the Bible?

#### The Writing of Gospel Tracts

- Do you read Gospel tracts?
- What should be the starting point for tracts?
- What should be the overall content?
- What is the most important element(s) in a tract?
- What tract has attracted you the most?
- Are Gospel tracts totally irrelevant to those who cannot read well?