

Sharing Life, Sharing Faith

Discussion #2

I. Bible Study

A. Truth - Is there such a thing as absolute truth?

In the Adult Instruction Class outline, Pastor Bolland discusses **truth** by asking this question:

What is the source of truth? Two and only two options exist:

1. Truth is determined by each individual internally. Whatever a person decides is true is true. This is subjective truth and may be contradictory truth.
2. Truth is determined externally from any individual. Something is true even if no one believes it. Something is true objectively and is completely disconnected from one's personal perception about what is true.

His conclusion:

Truth, in order to be truth, must be true for all people of all times in all places or it is not true at all! Real truth is always externally determined truth!

The scriptures themselves are full of statements that make it clear that not only does absolute truth exist, but that the scriptures, the Word of God, **is** absolute truth.

All your words are **true**; all your righteous laws are eternal. (**Psalm 119:160**)

Guide me in your **truth** and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. (**Psalm 25:5**)

Into your hands I commit my spirit, redeem me, O Lord, the God of **truth**. (**Psalm 31:5**)

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the **truth** is not in us. (**1 John 1:8**)

I have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness; I have not said to Jacob's descendants, 'Seek me in vain'. **I, the Lord, speak the truth**; I declare what is right. (**Isaiah 45:19**)

Key point: The Word of God does not merely **contain** truth, it **is** truth.

Not only does God tell us that he speaks the truth to us through His word, He wants everyone to know the truth.

This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the **truth**. (**1 Timothy 2:3-4**)

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever - the Spirit of **truth**. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. **(John 14:16-17)**

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and **truth**. John testifies concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, " He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me". From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. **For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (John 1:14-17)**

Note the 3-part Hebrew parallelism in the last part of this verse:

1. The law vs. grace and truth
2. was given vs. came
3. through Moses vs. through Jesus Christ

Jesus answered, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." **(John 14:6)**

Key Point: John 14:6 says it perfectly! This is the message that needs to be stated with absolute clarity, because it is absolute truth.

B. False Teachers - Who are they?

Jesus gives us a clear way to distinguish truth from false teachings.

Jesus answered, "My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me. If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. He who speaks on his own does so to gain honor for himself, but he who works for the honor of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him." **(John 7:16-18)**

There are all kinds of false teachers in the world who would love to have people follow them. Knowledge of the scriptures and doctrines of God will help us distinguish between true and false teachers.

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them - bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping. **(2 Peter 2:1-3)**

If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain. **(I Timothy 6:3-5)**

Throughout the scriptures, God warns of false teachers and tells us how to know them.

Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?" declares the LORD. "Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces? Therefore," declares the LORD, "I am against the prophets who steal from one another words supposedly from me. Yes," declares the LORD, "I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues and yet declare, 'The LORD declares.' Indeed, I am against those who prophesy false dreams," declares the LORD. "They tell them and lead my people astray with their reckless lies, yet I did not send or appoint them. They do not benefit these people in the least," declares the LORD. **(Jeremiah 23:28-32)**

C. Discussion Questions:

1. Are those who believe there is no truth more likely to lie?
2. Do all false teachers know they are teaching false doctrine?

II. Overview of Post-Modern Thought (quotes by Dr. Gene Veith)

A. What it is

In a nutshell, Post-Modern Thought says that there is no such thing as absolute truth. Truth is relative and is different things to different people. Therefore, all religions and all paths to God are equally right.

According to the postmodernists, the problem with the Enlightenment is not its uncritical dependence upon human reason alone, **but its assumption that there is such a thing as objective truth.**¹

Surrounded by diverse styles and cultures, we pick and choose from a global smorgasbord. We are told that we live in a pluralistic society, that we work in a global economy, that we must develop multicultural awareness. The fact is, real cultures promote strict ethical guidelines. From Mexico to Africa, family ties are strong and sexual promiscuity is strictly forbidden. No culture (other than our own) would teach that there are no absolutes. Contemporary Western culture with its pornography, consumerism, and all-encompassing skepticism toward authority and moral traditions is ravaging traditional cultures.²

B. How it pervades all aspects of our society and culture

Our culture is marked by an eclecticism that knows no bounds. Art, television, dress, and architecture all display random references that pay no attention to surroundings or time periods. The result is a collage of confused images, where truth is easily obscured. Truth becomes indistinguishable from fiction where there is no frame of reference.

Nations have always passed on their own culture; it seems both eccentric and futile to attempt to pass on other nations' cultures instead. While it is good to study other cultures, to BE multicultural would be to have no culture of one's own. Certainly, learning about other civilizations, studying other languages, and appreciating other customs is valuable. The postmodern approach, however, goes no deeper than the surfaces of the other cultures. There is little foreign language study, even though by the postmodernists' own admission language is the key to culture.³

The primary form of postmodernist artistic discourse is the collage. Today postmodernists love to flout the high-toned galleries where they exhibit their paintings of Elvis, collages of gum wrappers, and intentionally gaudy, tacky images.⁴

C. The Effect It Has Had on Christianity

For postmodernists, morality, like religion, is a matter of desire. What I want and what I choose is not only true (for me) but right (for me). That different people want and choose different things means that truth and morality are relative, but "I have a right" to my desires. Conversely, "no one has the right" to criticize my desires and my choices. The postmodernists sins are "being judgemental", "being narrow-minded", "thinking that you have the only truth", and "trying to enforce your values on anyone else". Those who question the postmodernist dogma that "there are no absolutes" are excluded from the canons of tolerance. The only wrong idea is to believe in truth; the only sin is to believe in sin.⁵

Today religion is not seen as a set of beliefs about what is real and what is not. Rather, religion is seen as a preference, a choice. We believe in what we **like**. We believe what we want to believe.⁶

This completely different way of thinking about religion - that it is a matter not of what is true but of what one likes and what one wants - explains why the cults take in so many intelligent and well-educated people. Postmodern religions do not require evidence or plausibility. Talk to a member of any cult, and notice how the person describes and evaluates its teachings in completely subjective and pleasure-oriented terms: 'The Maharishi is really cool.' Liking something and wanting it to be true are the only criteria for their beliefs.⁷

People are urged to make a "decision for Christ", a commitment regularly described as a function of the human will. This terminology corresponds well to the postmodernist mind-set, which understands religion and morality in terms of choice, not truth.⁸

The fact is, Christians too have become a segment of society rather than an integral part of the culture. The church is on its way to becoming a subculture. The ghettoization of Christianity, however, must be seen as part of the larger trend of the segmentation of postmodern culture. Dominant ideologies have often dealt with religious minorities by sealing them off into self-contained ghettos. Reducing religion to just another subculture is a way to marginalize Christianity, to silence its arguments. On the other hand, religious segregation can have unintended results. The Jews were forced into ghettos as a means of persecution, but this had the secondary effect of building a vital, close-knit Jewish community. Something similar may be in store for Christianity.⁹

Biblical Christians will find themselves in exactly the same position of the ancient Israelites and the early church - having to hold on to their faith in the midst of hostile pagan neighbors. They will also face the same temptations. ¹⁰

Part of the problem is that many folks have failed to understand that God only reveals one truth about all things in the Scriptures. The only point of biblical studies is to ascertain that one, true, Christian faith which speaks one truth about salvation in Christ Jesus, one truth about baptism, one truth about the Lord's Supper and on and on. In our Post-Modern culture such a notion is not taken seriously, but that simply means that the Christian faith is (as it always has been in the past) counter-cultural. **(Rev. Richard A. Bolland)**

D. How to respond effectively

Pastor Bolland's sermon entitled "**The God Who Is God**" addresses the problems of witnessing to the post-modernist mindset, and gives advice on how to remain respectful while still presenting a clear witness. Some key points are highlighted, but please take the time to read the entire sermon, because there are numerous gems of wisdom to be found in it!

It is hard to witness to truth to people who believe that truth is relative. It is hard to proclaim the forgiveness of sins to people who believe that, since morality is relative, they have no sins to forgive. According to a recent poll, 66 percent of Americans believe that 'there is no such thing as absolute truth'. ¹¹

Christians, if they are to be an alternative to postmodern relativism, need to confess their faith, in word and deed. This means knowing what that faith is. ¹²

III. Exercise

Instead of breaking out into groups of two, the entire group will share in this exercise. We will do two scenarios in which a non-believer makes a statement to a Christian, and a conversation ensues. Two people will play the roles of the two, but anyone can jump in at any time by standing behind one of the participants and placing a hand on their shoulder, speaking as if they were the participant.

Scenario #1 (This is an actual post, taken verbatim, from an internet discussion)

"I would like to think we could take a little bit of what we like about different beliefs and combine them just for ourselves; I would like other people to respect that and not try to "save" me. I have found that going with my "gut" or my "core beliefs" I have had a much better life than following one particular path."

Scenario #2

Well, I think that's great that you are a Christian, and I would never try to convince you that you are wrong, because it seems that you have found something really special. But I believe in Jesus too. In fact, I think that he was a great mystic, and when he went into the desert for 40 days, that's when he realized that he was really God. Before that he was just like us, but he showed us that we each can have that experience and come to recognize the god within us.

Discussion:

How did these scenarios go? Do either of these people believe that there is absolute truth? Did we follow Pastor Bolland's advice and present a clear witness? Did the people "see the light"? If not, how do we protect ourselves from frustration and discouragement when we have discussions like this?

IV. Journal Sharing

Review last month's journal and brief follow-up on the people we have already been in contact with.

Any new thoughts from our personal journals, or discussions with people we'd like to share with the group and add to the group journal.

V. Next Month

I. Bible Study - The Means of Grace

- A. Word of God**
- B. Sacraments**

II. The Cults

- A. What are they? What commonalities do they share?**
- B. Why do people get involved with cults?**
- C. Difficulties involved with witnessing to cult members**
- D. Some ideas for effective witnessing**

III. Outside Reading

- A. Additional Quotes by Dr. Veith**
- B. Pastor Bolland's Sermon, "The God Who Is God"**

Additional Quotes by Gene Veith on Post-Modern Thought (From his book, "Post-Modern Times")

Those who believe 'there are no absolutes' will dismiss those who reject relativism as 'intolerant', as trying to force their beliefs on other people.¹³

Societies in disintegration suffer a kind of 'schism of the soul'. They are seldom simply overrun by some other civilization. Rather, they commit a kind of cultural suicide. Disintegrating societies have several characteristic. They fall into a sense of abandon, 'a state of mind that accepts antinomianism--consciously or unconsciously, in theory or in practice--as a substitute for creativeness'. They also succumb to truancy, that is, escapism, seeking to avoid their problems by retreating into their own worlds of distraction and entertainment. There is a sense of drift, in which people yield to a meaningless determinism, as if their efforts do not matter and as if they have no control over their lives. There is a sense of guilt, a self-loathing that comes from their moral abandon. There is a promiscuity, which is meant not so much in the sexual sense, but as the indiscriminate acceptance of anything and everything, an unfocused eclecticism and uncritical tolerance.¹⁴

Perhaps an even better model is the virtual reality helmet. The much-heralded union of computers, television, and video games will enable us to put on a helmet that will create the illusion that we are in the middle of a computer-generated world. According to the postmodernists, all reality is virtual reality. We are all wearing helmets that project our own separate little worlds. We can experience these worlds and lose ourselves in them, but they are not real, nor is one person's world exactly the same as someone else's.¹⁵

Reading a 300-page book demands sequential thinking, active mental engagement, and a sustained attention span. Reading also encourages a particular sense of self - one reads in private, alone with oneself and with one's thoughts. Watching television, on the other hand, presents information rapidly and with minimal effort on the part of the viewer, who becomes part of a communal mass mind. Visual images are presented, rapid-fire, with little sense of context or connection. Television blurs the line between truth and entertainment. Film and video can now render the wildest fantasies and make them seem realistic. Real events, by the same token, are fictionalized. It is little wonder that the TV generation has a hard time distinguishing between truth and fiction and that intellectuals raised on TV argue that there is essentially no difference between the two.¹⁶

The Middle Ages had its cathedrals; the modern age had its factories, and the post-modern age has its shopping malls. Sometimes today churches resemble malls or theme parks, not only in their architecture, but in the way people think about them. Megachurches sometimes resemble malls, with the parking lots, atriums, information booths, and shops featuring Christian merchandise. Notice the implications of the phrase "church shopping". Surely, shopping for a church in the same way we shop for a major appliance is dangerous. Instead of looking for a church that teaches the Word of God, we sometimes look for a church that "fills our needs". The church does not exist to provide its members "services"; rather, it should challenge its members to engage in "service" to God and to their fellow human beings. When we think like consumers, we put ourselves first, picking and choosing what best corresponds to our desires.¹⁷

The new economic climate has given rise to a new social class geared to a less tangible product - information, advice, therapy. The New Class includes educators, communicators, planners, and those in the 'helping professions'...the traditional professions, medicine, law, engineering-- involve mastery of a specific body of knowledge and the application of an intrinsic logic. Different medical doctors, grounded in objective science and a standardized methodology, examining the same patient will tend to give a similar diagnosis and course of treatment. They exemplify modernism. The new professions, on the other hand, have no universally recognized body of knowledge and no generally accepted methods, although they invoke the jargon and the statistics of science.¹⁸

Seminaries began studying the Bible, not as the authoritative Word of God, but as any other ancient document, using the historical-critical methodology of "modern scientific scholarship". This approach assumed that the miracles of the Bible did not occur and must be accounted for in nonsupernatural ways. Rather than seeing the Bible as authoritative, it held the Bible statements should be received "critically", as reflecting the culture and preoccupations of an ancient people. Liberals designed their theology to accommodate modern thought and culture, turning the church away from its preoccupation with an otherworldly salvation to a concern with society's tangible problems. Churches began to sponsor encounter groups, and pastors began counseling their flock to help them to "self-realization".¹⁹

Whereas classical Christianity stresses the transcendence of God and His immutability, omnipotence, and omniscience, the new model stresses the immanence of God, who is dynamic, capable of change, and in partnership with His creation.²⁰

Classical Christianity sees the whole human race as implicated in Adam's Fall. As such, we are all corrupt and condemned. Sin is a condition. The new model denies the universal Fall. We are not guilty for Adam's sin, except as we follow Adam's poor moral example. Sin is an act.²¹

Classical Christianity teaches that our problem is our condemnation, that we all stand under the wrath of God. The new model teaches that our problem is essentially ignorance - we do not know how much God loves us.²²

Classical Christianity teaches that there is no salvation apart from faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ. The new model teaches that many are saved apart from faith in Christ, that the Holy Spirit can bring salvation even to people who do not know Christ, who is presented not so much as our sacrifice but as our example.²³

Classical Christianity teaches that our eternal state is immortality in either Heaven or Hell. The new model teaches that the wicked are annihilated, but that otherwise Heaven will be open to all.²⁴

Evangelism, according to this model, does not involve proclaiming God's judgment against us sinners and His gracious offer of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Rather, evangelism simply educates people as to how much God loves them.²⁵

¹ Veith, Dr. Gene Edward, "Post-Modern Times", © 1994, Crossways Books, Irvine CA pg 42

² Ibid, pp 143-144

³ Ibid, pp 152-153

⁴ Ibid, pg 98

⁵ Ibid, pp 195-196

⁶ Ibid, pg 193

⁷ Ibid, pp 194-195

⁸ Ibid, pg 212

⁹ Ibid, pg 148

¹⁰ Ibid, pg 201

¹¹ Ibid, pg 16

¹² Ibid, pg 220

¹³ Ibid, pg 19

¹⁴ Ibid, pg 44

¹⁵ Ibid, pg 61

¹⁶ Ibid, pg 81

¹⁷ Ibid, pp 117-118

¹⁸ Ibid, pp 178-179

¹⁹ Ibid, pp 191-192

²⁰ Ibid, pg 214

²¹ Ibid, pg 214

²² Ibid, pg 214

²³ Ibid, pg 214

²⁴ Ibid, pg 214

²⁵ Ibid, pg 215

The God Who Is God

Rev. Richard Bolland

Isaiah 45:1-7

(Oct. 20, 2002 sermon transcript)

Dear friends in Christ, we Christians of the 21st century have a challenge on our hands. We are called to give witness to the truth to a culture which rarely recognizes anything as being dependably true. We are called to give witness to the truth to a culture which does not recognize the truth, and we are called to give witness to the exclusiveness of salvation which is ours alone through Jesus Christ crucified and risen, and this we do to a culture that generally sees all religions as valid and true and equal. **Indeed, since the events of 9/11, we have seen interfaith worship services which again underscore our culture's misunderstanding that all religions speak equally, that all gods are considered equally valid, that in fact all of them are just fine and dandy as long as none of them make any exclusive claims to be true. This is the new American Civil Religion. It is a religion which is, of course, a false religion. It is a religion that isn't wrong because of what it believes, but rather because it believes anything and everything.**

Dear friends in Christ, this Old Testament reading that we heard just a few moments ago flies in the face of such a warped and deficient theology. Listen to the words. They are plain. They are clear. And they are simple. **I am the Lord, and there is no other. Apart from me, there is no God.**

It isn't just that people worship false gods. It's that they worship false, non-existent ones. There is only One, and His name is clear. He tells us that He is One, that He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And so how can we meet the challenge? **How can we meet the challenge of sharing our faith which is so entirely counter-cultural? And how can we do so in a way that is both respectful and winsome?**

First I would suggest to us, that as we read this text, one thing that cannot happen is that we would permit our faith, this Christian faith, to be homogenized into the American Civil Religion in any possible way. Indeed, theologians of every age have found opportunity to make the theology of the Christian faith more palatable to those of their particular culture.

In the **Age of Enlightenment**, theologians gladly bowed down at the altar of human reason, and gladly paid homage to that reason, which then informed scriptures. There was something called "higher criticism", a method of Biblical interpretation which placed human reason above the plain meaning of the text, and then and there the authority of the text was literally destroyed. We still see the ramifications of that to this very day.

In the **Age of Romanticism** the philosophy of pietism and the theology of pietism came about, as did that of existentialism. Pietism rested on subjective experience of God, and the subjective relationship with God. It had some strong points, but really had a deficiency as well. And so now, one's faith was based not on the objective actions of God, but rather on our subjective perceptions of him. Or else you fell into the despair of existentialism which simply said, "the game is rigged and there is no way out".

And then along came, of course, the Postmodern Times, the time in which you and I find ourselves. And there, even the centrality of Jesus Christ has been sacrificed by theologians and whole denominations who still call the name Christian but give homage to the American Civil Religion, to such an extent that many mainstream denominations have reformed and reformulated their thoughts on how one spreads the faith; that evangelism should no longer have as its object the conversion

of those who do not know Christ, but to simply point to the things we have in common. And the only thing we have in common with other faiths is the Law. And by works of the Law, no one can be saved.

Dear friends, every age has known its detractors of the faith, and every age has had orthodox Christians, who stood against the prevailing culture and gave clear witness to the faith which is ours in Christ Jesus, and to His atonement on the cross, and to His resurrection from the dead.

They did so, striking a balance between being a part of their culture and, at the same time being part of a religion that is, at its very core, counter-cultural, in each and every culture. We read Paul, as he sits at the Areopagus on Mars Hill, and we find him taking advantage of the culture in which he found himself. In Acts chapter 17 we read, “Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious. For I have walked around and carefully looked at your objects of worship. I even found an altar with this inscription, ‘to an unknown god’. Now what you worship as something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you.” And he does.

He used the setting in which he found himself, which incidentally was not at all setting of worship, it was simply a theological discourse in the public square. And what is more, he had somehow used that to his advantage.

He said, “Look at this inscription to an unknown god. Certainly you are a religious people”. Goodness sakes, couldn’t we say that about our culture? Indeed, it is very popular now in our culture to say, “I’m not religious, but I’m very spiritual.” And Lutherans sometimes scratch their heads and go “huh?” And sometimes the rest of the world does too. Because “spiritual” means you just think about spiritual things, and you try to connect with something that is spiritual regardless of what it may be, and so people are free to make their choices, how they act out their spirituality. Somehow, had it been possible for God to teleport St. Paul to this day and age, I am certain that there would have been many folk who would have said, “you know, you would get a lot further with your gospel if you would just join in worship with others of different faiths, and therefore gain some credibility that indeed your message may be heard.” But he would do no such thing.

Dear friends, the Roman Empire, in its last 300 years before the coming of Constantine, was not a Christian empire by any means. In fact, there was a cult of worship. It was the religion of the state, a “civil religion”, if you will. And it was, in fact, required of all Roman citizens from time to time, and they really didn’t have to meet at all. All they had to do was come once a year, and kneel down and make a small offering to Caesar as deity. But rather than be homogenized into that civil religion, these Christians would have rather gone to the lions, would rather have gone to the gladiators in the arenas, and be eaten and chopped to bits, rather than homogenize their faith or make it less clear than what it actually is.

Christianity, in order to retain its soul and saving message, finds it absolutely essential to maintain its claim to absolute and uncompromised truth. Especially that truth that which God tells us about in his Son, that Christ, who is God, became flesh and dwelt among us. That indeed we find that this One who came to save us in the flesh serves as our righteousness alone. That this One who died took on His body the penalty for our sins, and made full and complete payment for every last one of them. And what is more, following His death, after three days in a tomb, He rose physically from the dead, not merely a spiritual resurrection, but human flesh and cells became alive, and He lived, and lives still this day That is the message that does not compromise well. And does not homogenize well with the American Civil Religion at all.

Indeed, the days when America was known as a “Christian nation”, (if in fact it ever was, and I frankly doubt it), have long since come to an end. The culture in which we find ourselves is far more attuned to that of the first century this day than it ever has been before in our lifetimes. And I want you to know that the same challenges that were presented to those first Christians are also presented to us, to maintain the integrity and the solidity of the truth of this faith which we hold dear and which is our only salvation.

So we must remain, you see, unafraid and unintimidated to say exactly what our faith says, and to do so in a world that does not like it very much. Hear the bold words of this text again. **I am the Lord and there is no other. Apart from me there is no God.**

That is plain, that is simple, that is true, and that plain simple truth echoes the words of the first and greatest commandment, “you shall have no other gods before me”, found in Exodus 20:3 which we all know by heart. And we all know the meaning of that commandment, “you shall fear and love God above all things”.

And I would say to you, there is no backing away from such a statement of faith. There is no requirement, and I would suggest to you, absolutely no advantage to adjust this message, and that of Christ crucified and risen, so that it be more palatable to our prevailing cultural views. I would suggest to you, that we are called to speak plainly as God has spoken to us. But we need not do so with harshness, nor need we do so with a lack of respect. But we can do so with wisdom and with courage. Please notice how Paul goes about his witnessing on Mars Hill.

First remember this. To the Greeks, everything that was of the flesh was corrupt. That indeed, anything that was created, anything that was solid, that we could touch and feel, was of no importance whatsoever. So how does Paul talk about Christ? Verse 24 of Acts 17: “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built with hands.” Well, of course, every Grecian god lives in temples built with hands. How’s that for kindness and compassion and compromise? And yet he speaks the truth. Verse 25: “and He is not served by human hands as if He needed anything”, which of course the Greeks constantly did, “because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From the one man he made every nation of men” Well, that’s not at all in harmony with Greek understandings of how men came to be. “That they should inhabit the whole earth and that He determined the time set for them and the exact places in which they should live.” Verse 27: “God did this so that men could seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.” But the Greek gods were quite far from all of us. “For in Him we live and move, and have our very being. As some of your own poets have said, we are His offspring”. Again he taps into that culture of which he resides. 29: “Therefore, since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image made by man’s design and skill.” Once again, right “in your face” to the Greeks. “In the past, God overlooks such ignorance, but now he calls all people everywhere to repent.” 31. “for He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice, by the man he has appointed.” A man will judge the world? A fleshly human man?

He goes on. “He has given proof of this to all men by raising Him from the dead.” Who cares, if you’re a Greek, if flesh would raise from the dead? Flesh is of no importance. Flesh is corrupt. Yet Paul, in this setting of religious discussion, says, “this is that which we proclaim and we won’t back away from it”. 32 “When they heard about the resurrection of the dead,” as you might surmise, “some of them sneered. But others said we want to hear you again on this subject. After that Paul left the council.” A few men became followers of Paul and believed.

What compromise do you find in that witness? What adjustment is there to be more palatable to the culture? **Not a thing** regarding the theology that he said. He points at the statue to the unknown god and says, “let me tell you about it”. He quotes one of the Grecian poets, but only to make his point. And so we see, St Paul gives us a bit of a model, if you will, for witnessing in a culture that is foreign and hostile to the faith in which we believe and that which we teach and confess.

Rather than soft-sell the Christian faith by compromise with the Greeks, Paul teaches an uncompromising message that he knows will offend some of those who hear it. Without compromise, dear friends, we too are called to speak to truth, so that - and listen carefully - so that the unbeliever might be saved.

A confused and obfuscated proclamation of the gospel can only result in a confused and obfuscated understand of the same gospel. We must be clear. We must be straight. Isn't that how you wish people would deal with you?

Now then, it is in fact, not out of a sense of self-righteousness or superiority by which we do these things, but out of love and out of concern for those who are in unbelief. We must go out of our way to witness with clarity, so that they will know. It is absolutely no act of Christian love to offer some form of confession that gives any quarter to the false notions of God or the redemption which is ours alone through Christ Jesus. We must be clear.

We need to remember that that precious Gospel, that Gospel which we proclaim, can't be improved on by us. How could it be possible that we would presume to improve on the message that the love of God for fallen and sinful man was so great that He was moved to send His only Son, and to send Him out of the perfection of godhead into human flesh, corruptible, and mortal. How could we presume to improve on the message of the love of God which is so great that it is God himself in human flesh who dies to grant us the forgiveness of our sin. How could we presume to improve on the message that the curse of sin, which is death and suffering and the grave, has been fully and completely overcome through Christ's resurrection from the dead. And now death is no longer the end but only the beginning.

How could we presume to improve on the message that God will bring us to the protection of heaven, whose grace and merciful being is far beyond anything we can possibly begin to imagine, at whose arrival we will find that there will be no more tears, no disease, no suffering, it can't get any better than that. And no matter our intentions we cannot and will not improve on it.

No, friends, the great American mush-god of American Civil Religion will save no one from death and hell regardless of how pious, regardless of how tolerant, and regardless of how celebratory we are with respect to the diversity of faiths it embraces. Yet it is in this very culture, it is indeed in this syncretistic culture, it is indeed in this area where various faiths and plethora of saviors are offered to us that we had the same opportunity as did St. Paul, to speak clearly, to speak lovingly, to speak winsomely, but to speak without compromise, of the great love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Just as the early Christians were called to give witness to their faith in a culture which largely rejected their message, we too stand in that same privileged place, and in that same kind of culture. And so we speak with utter clarity, utter clarity of Christ crucified and risen. Utter clarity of sins forgiven and righteousness bestowed by Christ. As our now sainted past president of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod said before his death, “Get the message straight, Missouri...”, be clear, “...and get the message out, Missouri”, speak the faith. People are dying to hear from us. In Jesus' name, amen.