



## *The 2006 Aus Memorial Lectures*

# Proclaiming the Gospel on Mars Hill

MICHAEL ROGNESS

### *Lecture 1: The Wider View*

**I**n these two lectures I will contrast the first two sermons of the Apostle Paul in the book of Acts. The sermons are very different, because Paul is speaking to very different audiences. The first is his sermon to a Jewish audience in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13); the second is his sermon to the Athenians on Mars Hill (Acts 17).<sup>1</sup>

#### THE SETTING

The sermon on Mars Hill in Athens is remarkable because of its setting. Paul is speaking to people who know nothing about the Christian message or the biblical story. We, on the other hand, do virtually all of our preaching in Antioch, so to speak—that is, in the synagogue, in our church sanctuaries. Our biggest need for evangelism is to get out of the church, as Paul did in Athens.

Shortly after the Iron Curtain and Berlin Wall went down I was invited to teach a course at the independent Lutheran seminary in Leipzig, formerly East Germany. One section was entitled “Homiletical Problems,” and I talked about lack of biblical knowledge, widespread weekend travel, crowded Sunday schedules, and so on. After a week or two one of the German students said I hadn’t even mentioned the number one “homiletical problem” in the former East Germany (actually all over Europe), that is, as he said, “Niemand da!”—nobody in church on

<sup>1</sup>See the article on these sermons by my colleague James Limburg, “Antioch, Athens and the Age of Aquarius,” *The Cresset* 33/9 (1970).

*These lectures on preaching the gospel in the contemporary world serve as a fitting summation of and tribute to the work of Michael Rogness, who just retired as professor of preaching at Luther Seminary.*

Sunday mornings. He went on to say that their basic challenge in evangelism is to figure out how and where to speak the gospel where people actually are.

## THE SERMONS

We preach today to audiences different from those our predecessor preachers faced fifty or a hundred years ago, certainly different from the audiences the Reformers preached to in the sixteenth century.

My concern is that we often preach Antioch sermons to Athenian people. We need to learn from St. Paul to preach to an audience different than those we are used to. A professor at another seminary recently said, “We’re preparing wonderful pastors here for the 1950s, and when that decade returns, we’ll be good and ready for it.” That decade is not going to return. We’re in Athens now, and the Antioch sermon doesn’t work so well here.

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In the first of the two sermons, Paul is speaking, as we read, to “you Israelites and others who fear God [presumably Gentiles who knew something of the Jewish faith]” (Acts 13:16). Paul is on familiar ground here, and these people know the Old Testament, so Paul rolls out that whole history. The sermon reviews Abraham, Moses, the judges, Samuel, Saul, David, the prophets, right up to John the Baptist, who said that “one is coming after me” (vv. 17–25).

With that lengthy introduction, he comes to his main theme: “God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised” (v. 23). He reminded them how Jesus was crucified, then raised from the dead, fulfilling the promises of God and bringing with him the forgiveness of sins, setting us free from the law of Moses.

Following the sermon, “many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas” (v. 43), although Paul’s opponents stirred up trouble. Acts 14 reports that the same thing happened in Iconium, where Paul also preached in the Jewish synagogue. For the next chapters Paul continues on as he travels, preaching in synagogues to people who knew their Hebrew Bible.

Now we preach to people who don’t know the Bible very well at all and who live in a society in some ways very different than that of our parents’ and grandparents’ generations. It has become a cliché to label this a “postmodern age.” I’d like to identify today’s audience, then give some suggestions for how to preach today, how to evangelize people who do not know or experience the Christian gospel.

## PREACHING TO OUR AGE

Here are some characteristics of the audience we are facing:

(1) For an increasing number of people, the Bible is an unfamiliar book. Sto-

ries and allusions that used to be common currency among educated people are unknown today. There are fascinating stories about British military officers in Victorian England who used to send telegrams with terse phrases taken from the Bible, knowing that they would be understood in the London home office. One officer in India was surrounded by the enemy and didn't know if reinforcements would arrive in time. He wired back to London just three words, "But if not." The staff in the war office recognized the quote from Dan 3:18, where Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had answered the king, If God wants to save us from the furnace, he will do so. "But if not," we will remain steadfast. That sort of thing would never happen anymore, and I don't need to belabor the point.

(2) A second characteristic of our so-called "postmodern age" is relativism. As one of the fathers of postmodernism, Jean-François Lyotard, put it, there are no metanarratives anymore—no overarching stories that define a people, a nation, a society, or a civilization.<sup>2</sup> Most people in America today can name all six main characters of the TV series *Friends*, but not six of the twelve disciples of Jesus.

A cartoon in the *New Yorker* a while back pictured two parents sitting on a sofa facing their ten-year-old daughter, slouched in a chair opposite. They are saying, "Honey, we're thinking it's time you started getting some religious instruction. There's Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish—any of those sound good to you?" In other words, "take your pick," whatever seems good to you. In a postmodern world each person creates and formulates his or her own truths.

In October 2005, Jewish and Muslim students at Macalester College in Saint Paul gathered together to celebrate the rare convergence of their two holidays, Rosh Hashanah and Ramadan, as a sign of peace between their two groups. The local newspaper headlined the story "Sampling each other's faiths."<sup>3</sup> Whoever wrote that headline gave away his or her postmodern perspective and thus missed the point of what was really significant about this story. These were not postmodern relativists "sampling" each other's faith. These were devout Jews and devout Muslims creating an occasion where they could come together and in a rare kind of harmony celebrate their holy time with each other, even while both sides held strongly to their own convictions.

(3) A third characteristic of this age, of course, is secularism. That includes out-and-out atheistic secularism, which denies the existence of anything outside of the material world. But I also include what I would call a "deistic secularism," held by people who may profess a belief in God, but a God who really has nothing to do with their lives. That's far more a problem for us than out-and-out atheism. Atheists usually love to talk about God and are open to discussion, but secularized deists merely shrug their shoulders at the mention of God.

<sup>2</sup>Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>3</sup>"Sampling each other's faiths," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 4 October 2005, B1.

(4) A fourth characteristic of this age is a skepticism or cynicism about institutions and, specifically for this topic, the church as an organization.

With that brief survey of our situation, we return to Acts 17, where Paul finds himself in Athens. He did speak there in the synagogue, but he also spoke every day in the marketplace, the *agora*, where he puzzled the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers by “babbling,” as they said, about “foreign divinities” (v. 18). So they took him to a hill west of the Acropolis, Mars Hill or the Areopagus—the community center where court sessions were also held. Paul had aroused their curiosity and they wished to continue the discussion.

Now Paul faced an audience quite different from those he had been preaching to the last few weeks. What in the world is this new teaching? they asked. It sounds rather strange to us, they said. Paul knew his sermon from Antioch or his sermon in the Athens synagogue wouldn’t work on Mars Hill among people who knew nothing of the biblical story, so he preached an entirely different sermon than he had ever preached before—although he ended up in the same place, as we will see later.

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References to the Old Testament won’t work here. Paul needs to find common ground with the hearers’ sense of religion, with what they believe, and then work his way to the Christian gospel. My proposal is that today we need to do the same—look for common concerns between us and those with whom we speak. Plenty of nonbelievers, non-Christians, non-whatever, have the same concerns, though they might see them in quite different ways.

In the business world, or in those areas where there are any kind of negotiations going on, people know that you start by agreeing on common ground. When labor and management start working out a new contract, or when various factions meet to work something out, they try to start with common ground.

When it comes to evangelism or missions, all too often the Christian approach has been to sweep all other beliefs and practices aside and start from scratch with the full-blown body of Christian dogma and practice. That’s not what Paul did in Athens. He looked for openings, places where he could lay some common ground, entry points that would lead to the proclamation of the gospel. So, following Paul’s example, and in some instances following the verses from his own sermon, I would like to propose seven topics of what I would call “entry-level evangelism” for today’s audience.

### *1. The human quest for “something more”*

I expect you all know people who do not belong to any church, nor to any of

the world's many religions, but do have a sense, however vague or vacuous, that there is "something more." We tend to dismiss this sort of thing as sentimentality or fuzzy romanticism, but it's an opening.

When Hamlet tells his friend Horatio that his murdered father's ghost spoke to him and told how he was murdered and that his mother married the murderer, Horatio can't believe all that. Hamlet says, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."<sup>4</sup>

Most people believe that to be true. There are very few honest-to-goodness total secularists or materialists among us, people who believe there is absolutely nothing more than what we see, hear, and feel around us. Most people believe there is, indeed, "something more." That's an opening.

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Every generation of college students has a book about religion that everybody reads, whether it's Hal Lindsay, M. Scott Peck, Harold Kushner, or now Dan Brown. When I was in college it was C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. A particular paragraph had a profound effect on me:

The first big division of humanity is into the majority, who believe in some kind of God or gods, and the minority who do not. On this point Christianity lines up with the majority—lines up with ancient Greeks and Romans, modern savages, Stoics, Platonists, Hindus, Muslims, etc., against the modern Western European materialist.<sup>5</sup>

That hit me like a ton of bricks. I had always assumed that we Christians were on one side and other religions were on the other. But if indeed "the first big division of humanity" is between those who believe in some kind of God or gods and those who don't, then we are on the same side as all these others—Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, and so on. In this "first big division," they are on our side, because they believe in something more. At that fundamental level I have more in common with a primitive African animist than I do with my neighbors up and down my street who live with no sense whatsoever of something bigger.

The "majority" of people, as C. S. Lewis put it, do believe there is "something more" out there, even today in this supposedly very secular world. Most people don't go beyond a vague idea of all that. Some do, and there are lots of people for whom that little opening has led them to a fuller faith.

That's exactly how Paul began: "Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way'" (Acts 17:22). He could have said, "Athenians, you think you're religious, but you have it

<sup>4</sup>William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, I.v.

<sup>5</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952) 29.

all wrong.” That might be accurate, but it would be a terrible way to start. Start with what you have, common ground. That’s what Paul does: “I see how extremely religious you are in every way.”

Paul continues: “For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (v. 23). Paul found a fortuitous circumstance, a door you could drive a truck through, and that’s what he did. In other words, Paul is saying, “You think there’s something more, but you aren’t sure what. We also think there’s something more. Let’s talk.” Common ground.

## *2. The sense of God in nature*

Now, let’s get a bit more specific about this unknown God. Paul goes on: “The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things” (vv. 24–25).

I spent fifteen years as a pastor in Duluth, where one of the primary recreations was to go canoeing in the Boundary Waters. If I’ve heard one person I’ve heard a hundred come back and say things like:

“Out there in the grandeur of creation, I felt awed by God the Creator.”

“I realized how beautiful God created everything.”

“When I saw all those stars I just knew God created it all. I felt really close to God out there.”

For some people this is the first time in their lives they have ever been far enough from city lights actually to see the stars.

You have all heard people talk like this, and you have probably felt the same yourselves. For many people the beauty or vastness of creation is their entrée into a sense of God. Furthermore, I’m one of them. During the summer, when we are in northern Minnesota, every night before going to bed, I go out and look at the stars. We love taking a boat or canoe out into the lake or driving to a lonely spot and naming as many constellations as possible. Our goal is not to come in until we have seen at least one meteor shoot across the starlit sky and one man-made space satellite on its somewhat slower journey. It does my soul as much good as being in church.

As theologians, particularly Protestants, we don’t put much stock in what we call “natural theology,” that is, what we can learn about God from nature around us. After all, nature can be cruel and ugly as surely as it is beautiful.

But it’s an opening to talk with people. The point at the beginning is not where or how they get a sense of God. The point is that we start where they do. If God created all this, what else does God do? What kind of God is this? That’s what Paul does in Athens: The God who made all there is “gives to all mortals life and

breath and all things” (v. 25). Now we’re getting someplace. God has not only made all this, but God gives us, all of us, life and breath and everything else. God is not only God of the vast creation; God made us—you and me—as well. Now we not only have common ground, we are moving forward to something new.

### 3. *The sense of a spiritual dimension to human life*

Another common ground is “spirituality,” which has become a very trendy word nowadays and a word many of us are pretty suspicious of. The problem with the term “spirituality” is that it’s a huge sprawling idea that means whatever any individual says it means. It can be applied to any religion, and people who don’t consider themselves “religious” at all can speak of their “spiritual” life.

So, let’s start there. That’s where Paul goes next. Why does God create? “So that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us” (v. 27). God not far from us? Now we’re into spirituality big-time. Paul continues to push forward with what this means. Over against the charge that he’s saying new and strange things, he quotes two lines from their own poetry, lines probably familiar to those standing there: “For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring’” (v. 28).

Paul takes this affirmation even further in the next verse: “Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals” (v. 29). So God is not an idol or an object, or a block of stone with a title on it. God is the one “in whom we live and move and have our being.” You want to talk about spirituality? Yes, let’s do exactly that. Is spirituality just some internal sense of something within me, or is there a larger, spiritual dimension to human life? Once we start talking about “spirituality,” we press on for what this means. That’s exactly what Paul does.

### 4. *The longing for meaning in life*

Gregg Easterbrook wrote in 1998:

Yet millions of thoughtful, skeptical women and men are comfortable neither with traditional dogmatic religion nor with postmodern abdication of faith. They long to know their souls. They wonder whether they are children of molecules or of a Maker. They may have felt a sensation of the sacred, or seen spiritual awareness redeem a troubled life. They yearn for some glimpse of purpose in the world of material society, for some sense of connection to a larger whole, for assurance that there are still things worth believing in....It is to those who seek the spiritual center—whose hearts are open to higher purpose but whose heads are aware of the many valid objections—that this book is addressed.<sup>6</sup>

More recently, Easterbrook wrote this:

Today the majority of men and women in the United States and the European

<sup>6</sup>Gregg Easterbrook, “Is There Anything Left to Believe?” preface to *Beside Still Waters: Searching for Meaning in an Age of Doubt* (New York: W. Morrow, 1998) viii.

Union have acquired the living circumstances, reasonable comfort, and decent health for which previous generations yearned. Now we begin to hunger both for comfort and meaning. A transition from material want to meaning want is in progress on an historically unprecedented scale—involving hundreds of millions of people—and may eventually be recognized as a principal cultural development of our age. Meaning can be found. The life-is-meaningless intellectual fad is almost over, wafting away of its own insubstantiality, while the rising interest in spiritual questions shows that average people are way ahead of the intellectuals on this one.

He recognizes that nonbelievers also search for meaning and continues with this:

Here are the poles of possibility: If God exists, then surely life has meaning. And if God does not exist, then surely life has meaning. Meaning may be divinely conferred. If not, we can create meaning by living decent and admirable lives. As Western society moves from material want to meaning want, we must always be aware that meaning is harder to come by than a car or house.<sup>7</sup>

Is this true, that in this day and age, where for many survival and reasonable comfort have been attained, we are in “a transition from material want to meaning want...on an historically unprecedented scale”? For many people a search for meaning is a desperately urgent enterprise. To what extent is Gregg Easterbrook right that “if God does not exist, then surely life has meaning...[If God does not exist] we can create [our own] meaning”? Or is the cynical Ivan in Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov* more accurate when he says, “Where there is no God, all things are possible”? Whatever the case, we Christians are right in the middle of the discussion, because we believe life has profound meaning.

Recently, the local paper had an extensive feature about atheists in Minnesota. Included was an article entitled “Life doesn’t need faith to give it meaning.”<sup>8</sup> That in itself is an opening, a place for dialogue: they believe life doesn’t need God to give it meaning; we believe it is God who gives life meaning. So where do they find and derive meaning without God? Good question, a dialogue that an honest atheist will welcome, which is what that whole section in the newspaper was about.

How else can we explain the phenomenal success of Rick Warren’s “purpose-driven” books—with sales of 21 million, more than any nonfiction hardback in American history—except to say that there is in our society a real hunger to find meaning in life?

I love John Irving’s book *A Prayer for Owen Meany*.<sup>9</sup> In the movie based loosely on the book, Owen’s name was changed to Simon Birch, but he was also a physically handicapped little boy.<sup>10</sup> Twelve-year-old Simon believed God had a

<sup>7</sup>Gregg Easterbrook, *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse* (New York: Random House, 2003) 211.

<sup>8</sup>“Life doesn’t need faith to give it meaning,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 24 February 2006, Faith and Values Section.

<sup>9</sup>John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (New York: Ballantine, 1989).

<sup>10</sup>The 1998 movie, written for the screen and directed by Mark Steven Johnson, was entitled *Simon Birch*, apparently because John Irving refused to allow use of the name “Owen Meany” for this film.

purpose for his life, which is the theme of both the book and the movie. At one point in the film, he says, “I keep waiting for God to show me a sign, like the burning bush and Ten Commandments, but I guess he doesn’t go in for that sort of thing anymore.”

One scene takes place in Reverend Russell’s office. Simon asks him, “Does God have a plan for us? I like to think he does. I think God made me the way he did for a reason.” Russell replies, “I’m glad your faith helps you deal with your condition.” Simon answers, “That’s not what I mean. I think I’m God’s instrument, that he’s going to use me to carry out his plan.” Russell answers, “It’s wonderful to have faith, Simon, but don’t overdo it.” The boy’s face falls, and he leaves the office.

Later on, after Simon has caused chaos in the Christmas pageant, the exasperated pastor sits him down in his office and says, “What do you want me to do? What do you want me to say?” Simon replies, “I want to know that there’s a reason for things. I used to be certain, but now I’m not so sure. I want you to tell me that God has a plan for me, a plan for all of us. Please.” There’s a long pause, and finally Pastor Russell says, “Simon, I can’t.” The little boy looks down sadly and leaves the room.

Does God have a plan for us? We think God has given us definite plans for human life. In a world that wants meaning so badly, we have a message to feed that hunger.

### 5. Community

We live in a society awash with lonely people, particularly at both ends of human life, the young and the elderly. If we mean what we say about loving one another and caring for one another, Christian congregations should be places of community and hospitality, an obvious entry point for evangelism.

Rollie Martinson of this seminary, along with Hal Weldin and several others, recently completed a four-year study involving over six thousand people in 131 congregations from seven denominations—the congregations all known for nurturing the faith of their young people—to learn what factors keep youth and young adults active in their congregations. A number of their conclusions had to do directly with community and hospitality. For example:

- youth and young adults who remained active in their congregations had been nurtured by adult Christian mentors;
- at critical intervals in their own faith development, a friend of deep faith had invited them and included them in their groups;
- these youth and young adults named as important “quality relationships” and a feeling that they are welcomed and valued as members;
- these youth found church to be a steady, compassionate, and helpful presence in times of crisis in their lives.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>See the report and data at Roland Martinson, “The Spirit of Youth Ministry,” at [www.exemplarym.com](http://www.exemplarym.com) (accessed 11 May 2007). Similar conclusions are reached by Roland Martinson, Paul Hill, and David Anderson in *Coming of Age* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005).

Should we be surprised that the faith of these young people was supported and nurtured by the community within their congregations and with other Christians? I don't think so. They substantiated what we knew in our bones all along, that is, that the desire and need for community is universal among human beings and that we Christians are meant to be truly a "communion of saints." I'm sure that's what Martin Luther had in mind when he wrote in the Smalcald Articles that one of the works of the gospel is "the mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers and sisters" (Part 3, Article 4).

6. *A concern for justice, for the good of society*

A lot of people are turned off from the church precisely because they perceive the church, or Christians, to be very little moved by the plight of the poor and those who suffer injustice. We who are disciples of Jesus should be leading the way, and many of Jesus' people are. After all, in the words of the prophet Micah, "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?...What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic 6:6–8).

Paul touches on this subject ever so slightly: God, says Paul, "has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31).

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7. *The nature of faith*

In a world that thinks faith is something religious or "churchy," we need to make crystal clear that faith is a part of every life. A man in my congregation was once active in the congregation but stopped attending. I called on him, and I've never forgotten what he said to me: "You live by faith, but I live by facts." In one way or another that describes what a lot of people think. Faith is like believing "six impossible things before breakfast," in the words of Lewis Carroll's White Queen, and now many people in this scientific age think it's more enlightened to jettison all that superstitious baggage and stick with what we know. My friend's statement took me aback, and I don't think I did a very good job of responding to him. But I'm older now, and I hope wiser, and given the chance I could do better.

What is faith? Take the definition in Heb 11:1, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Or take the simpler assertion of the Reformation: "Faith is trust," that is, faith is more than knowledge (*notitia*), more than agreement (*assensus*); at its very heart faith is trust (*fiducia*).

We need to make clear to this world that human beings live by faith every day of their lives. Every day we do things with an “assurance of things hoped for and a conviction of things not seen.” We gather what facts we can, but finally we act in the trust and hope that it will work out. Getting into a car is an act of faith. We are trusting that our car will not break down or that an oncoming driver will not crash into us. Almost all the time our trust is justified, but every now and then we read some tragic story about somebody whose trust was misplaced and who was killed in an accident.

Any person’s whole day is one act of faith after another. When we go into a restaurant, we don’t have a taster sample the food before us, like paranoid rulers used to do. We “trust” that the cook is not a maniac poisoner. Stepping into an elevator is an act of faith. Being among people is an act of faith that a terrorist or murderer isn’t nearby with plans to kill us. Just getting out of bed and starting our everyday routine is an act of faith that our bodies will not collapse.

However, there are times when what we have trusted in proves unreliable, and our faith is misplaced. Cars break down two hundred miles after we have set off on a long journey. People roar through stop signs and smash into us. Strange bacteria infect people in restaurants. Elevator cables might snap. People in apparent good health drop dead of heart attacks. Terrorists and murderers kill totally unsuspecting people.

If my friend was really accurate when he said, “I live my life not by faith but by facts,” would he have ever taken any kind of risk? He fell in love and got married, an act of faith if ever there was one. Marriage is always an act of faith. Getting out of bed in the morning is an act of faith.

That’s what I should have made clear to him. We all live by faith, by trusting, all the time. Once we acknowledge that, then the obvious next question is, “What or whom do we trust in?”—and with that we are into evangelism again.

With these seven “entry points” of evangelism we are doing what Paul did in Athens, and with some of them we are saying things remarkably similar to what Paul said in Athens.

It may have occurred to you that all of these seven topics have to do with the first and third articles of the creed, with the Father and the Spirit. We haven’t gotten to the second article yet. We haven’t talked about Jesus.

Paul didn’t do that either that day on Mars Hill. He leads up to it and ends his sermon with almost a fleeting reference to Jesus. In this lecture we did what Paul did in Athens: we just laid the groundwork for Christian evangelism. Next we tighten the focus and look to Jesus.

## Lecture 2: The Focused View

Now we come to what I call the “focused picture.” As different as Paul’s two sermons are, they both end up at the same place—with Jesus. In Antioch, after laying the foundation from the Old Testament, Paul talked extensively about Jesus. In Athens he ended with only a terse reference to Jesus, as if to pique the curiosity of these Athenians, because, as we read before the sermon, the Athenians were curious and loved to debate. So Paul ends his sermon with this brief teaser: “[God] has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31).

That’s it, just a terse and fleeting reference to a man who will judge the world with justice and whom God raised from the dead. After being on common ground for all these verses, this little zinger would have caught their attention. It worked, because in the next verse we read: “When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this’” (v. 32).

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*“for us the very heart and center of it all comes down to a sacred person, the incarnate Son of God, Jesus”*

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This is where all Christian evangelism leads—to Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Messiah, the Christ, God’s only Son our Lord. However we start—from the Old Testament, from Greek curiosity about God, from Greek poets—it all points to Jesus in the end. Whether Paul speaks to Jews in Antioch or Greeks in Athens, it all comes to Jesus. When I came to the Luther Seminary faculty twenty years ago, Steve Charleston was also here, a Choctaw Indian from Oklahoma. He used to speak of “the Old Testament of my people.” That was the Native American spirituality out of which he came, which for him, an Episcopal priest, also led to Jesus. His formulation had an odd ring to those of us for whom the Old Testament is the Hebrew Scriptures, but Steve came from a different direction. All of us Christians come to Jesus. That’s what a Christian is.

We can speak of a holy book, the Bible. We can speak of sacred time, the Sabbath; sacred space, where we worship; sacred music; and so on. But for us the very heart and center of it all comes down to a sacred person, the incarnate Son of God, Jesus.

The famous missionary E. Stanley Jones was fond of telling about a missionary who became lost in the African jungle. He wandered around, without finding any familiar landmarks. At last he came upon a small settlement of native huts and asked if someone could show him the way. “Follow me,” one of the natives said, and set off. As they hacked their way through the jungle, the missionary became worried because they didn’t seem to be on any path. “Are you sure this is the way?” he asked. “Where is the path?” The native turned and answered, “Bwana, in this

place there is no path. *I am the path.*” Or the same thing from the Gospel of John, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

When my brother Andrew was in high school, my parents hosted a student from Uganda. Abraham was Muslim. The American Field Service organization makes it very clear that American host families are to be hospitable to the religious traditions of our guests and not try to convert them. So my parents told Abraham that on Sunday morning the family would be going to church, but he was free to do what he wished. He said he would go too. He liked music, so it wasn’t long before he was singing in the youth choir. Then my Dad noticed that he was confessing the Apostles’ Creed right along with the congregation. He told Abraham he shouldn’t feel as if he had to do that, but in the conversation Abraham said how much he liked Jesus and, as a matter of fact, how Jesus is much respected among Muslims. He didn’t believe Jesus was crucified and was buried, and he didn’t say that part of the creed, because, as he said, “God would never allow that to happen.” But Abraham liked Jesus, and at one point he reflected and said to my Dad, “We don’t have anything like the forgiveness of sins in our faith,” and he missed that.

I read once that Mahatma Gandhi, as simply as he lived, had one picture on his wall, a picture of Jesus.

Many of you have used the J. B. Phillips translation of the New Testament. When Phillips translated the New Testament into modern English, he was struck anew by the person of Jesus. He then wrote another book, called *Ring of Truth*, where he described how after working so intensely in translating the Gospels he became astonished anew at the person of Jesus. He told how the portrait of Jesus in these New Testament books did indeed have the “ring of truth” for him. He wrote:

I was not at all prepared for the *unconventional* man revealed in these terse Gospels. No one could possibly have invented such a person: this was no puppet-hero built out of the imaginations of adoring admirers. “This man Jesus” so briefly described, rang true, sometimes alarmingly true. I began to see now why the religious Establishment of those days wanted to get rid of him at all costs. He was sudden death to pride, pomposity and pretense.<sup>12</sup>

Read the four Gospels and you cannot escape being captured by the personality of Jesus. He combines all the best about human life—strong yet gentle, compassionate yet tough-minded, capable of weeping and anger, constantly among people yet needing to be alone at times, loving sinful people without approving of their sin, plain-looking yet obviously a magnetic personality, having a simple lifestyle yet able to associate with the wealthy and powerful. One does not have to be a Christian to realize that Jesus of Nazareth was a unique human being in all of history!

So what do we say about Jesus to our age? Now that at the outset of this twenty-first century we are no longer in the familiar synagogue of Antioch, where

<sup>12</sup>J. B. Phillips, *Ring of Truth: A Translator’s Testimony* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, Ltd., 1967) 87.

we can talk about the Old Testament, as Paul did, but on our Mars Hill, talking to a different audience, how do we proclaim the gospel about Jesus?

My proposal is this: *We need to recapture the fullness and the breadth of the New Testament message about Jesus.*

I grew up with a Christology 101 view. I was sinful, and Jesus had taken my place, died for me, so that I would be forgiven and eventually live in eternal life because he was raised from the dead. It's all true, and I still believe that.

One of the most important books for me during my seminary years and since is that old classic, Gustaf Aulén's *Christus Victor*.<sup>13</sup> Aulén argued that there have been three main ways that Christ's work of atonement has been understood and that we need to broaden our understanding of Jesus' ministry by reclaiming all three: Christ as victor, Christ as satisfaction, and Christ as example of the God-intended human life.

Aulén argued that *Christus victor* was, as he called it, the "classical" view of Christ's work. Death was the problem, ever since Adam and Eve had been driven from the garden of Eden. Salvation was the victory over death gained when God raised Jesus from the dead. This is still the predominant emphasis in the Eastern Orthodox churches. With the emphasis on the victory of the resurrection, you seldom see a crucifix in an Orthodox church. Rather, in their sanctuaries you will see icons of the resurrected and ascended Christ as Pantocrator, the "word through

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*"Gustaf Aulén contends that, over against the satisfaction emphasis of the Middle Ages, Martin Luther revived the classical view of the atonement"*

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whom all things were created," who now reigns in heaven. Salvation is to be joined in eternity with the Triune God, sharing in the eternity of the Trinity.

The second view is the "satisfaction" view, the crucified Jesus as satisfaction for our sins, making it possible for us to be freed from the punishment of sin, exemplified most thoroughly in Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*. That's more or less what I thought, though not with the logical and juridical rigor of Anselm and company. There the problem is sin and guilt over against a just God, and salvation is seen as forgiveness, imputed to us—"forensic justification," as we say.

The third view is Jesus as the example of true human life, prominent in Abelard and later in Friedrich Schleiermacher, where Jesus' teachings and life itself become for us a pattern of life. In this view the problem is sinful living and the devastation sin has caused on earth, because we have separated ourselves from God. Salvation is to be disciples of Jesus, in communion with God, following Jesus' example of human life here on earth—the *imitatio Christi* or imitation of Christ.

<sup>13</sup>Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor* (New York: Macmillan, 1931).

I had never thought that widely of the atonement, and that book blew my horizons wide open. Furthermore, Gustaf Aulén contends that, over against the satisfaction emphasis of the Middle Ages, Martin Luther revived the classical view of the atonement. Just listen to his hymn:

A Mighty Fortress is our God,  
A sword and shield victorious;  
He breaks the cruel oppressor's rod  
And wins salvation glorious.<sup>14</sup>

What happened, Aulén argues, is that after Luther the next generation of Lutheran theologians reverted back to the more “Latin” or “satisfaction” view that they had inherited from previous generations in the Western (Roman) church, where guilt and forgiveness had long been the dominant themes of salvation.

That is not altogether surprising. The center of our Reformation heritage is justification by grace through faith. The burning question of the sixteenth century was, “How can I find a gracious God?” It was an age burdened by sin, and obsessed with doing enough to get out of the hundreds, maybe thousands of years of unpleasant purgatory our sins had destined us to. In the centuries before the Reformation, attention had come to be focused on good works, long prayers, money to the church—just do stuff, and lots of it, to get to heaven on the fast track. The Dominican monk John Tetzel made it sound even better when he toured Saxony in 1517, hawking plenary or full indulgences with his little ditty, “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.”<sup>15</sup> To the people on the street it sounded like a straight ticket to heaven, and he made gobs of money. It was this spectacle that drove the monk Martin Luther over the edge and prompted him to write his ninety-five statements in a fury, beginning the vast convulsion and upheaval in Europe known as the Reformation, from which we come.

Coming from that setting, it was natural that we saw the good news, the gospel, as Jesus setting us free from the law. The problem was guilt, and salvation was primarily forgiveness. And since we are still sinful and guilty, we still include confession and absolution regularly in our worship.

I got a call from a young lady whom I had confirmed, who had recently moved to the Twin Cities with her husband. She called me up to tell me that a church they had visited—an ELCA Lutheran church—had omitted the confession and absolution at the beginning of the service. The pastor explained that they were trying to reach out to people who hadn't gone to church much, if at all, and to start the service with a confession of sins was, as he put it, “kind of a downer.” “But,” she said, “I always feel better when we start with confession and forgiveness. It seems right that when we come before God we start that way, hear that our sins are forgiven, and then we can get on with the rest of the worship service.” I thought to myself, maybe she was listening better during confirmation than I thought!

<sup>14</sup>Martin Luther, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #503.

<sup>15</sup>Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950) 78.

Certainly, confession and absolution will always be part of our proclamation, because people until the end of time will be sinful and need to acknowledge and confess sins. But in this world we also need that classical view, and I would argue we need the third view: Christ as example. In Aulén's book that third view, Christ as example, ran a distant third, but it has now enjoyed a renaissance in modern liberation theology, as well as much feminist theology, where discipleship is seen as following Jesus' example in concern for the poor, the outcast, justice, and so on.

Article 4 of the Augsburg Confession says we are "freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith." What exactly is justification? We have a problem now: Nobody on today's Mars Hill knows what this is. In our computer-literate generation, "justification" is how you set the margins on your paper. Furthermore, what does it mean to be saved? The Apology of the Augsburg Confession uses three words again and again as descriptions: "forgiveness," "reconciliation," and occasionally "acceptance."

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***"For many people today, what could better convey the message of Christ's work than reconciliation?"***

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Obviously we need *forgiveness*, although many of our listeners certainly don't live under the oppressive burden of sin felt in the sixteenth century.

For many people today, what could better convey the message of Christ's work than *reconciliation*? In a world where there are so many bitter divisions, not just among nations, but within families, within neighborhoods, between friends, in the workplace, we need to hear that Jesus came to heal the separation between us and God and eventually among us humans. Reconciliation is all over the New Testament: "We even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation" (Rom 5:11). "We are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God" (Eph 2:19). For people today this is an enormously powerful proclamation.

But for people who feel inadequate, crummy about themselves, ashamed about themselves, lonely, the word of *acceptance* might be a more direct and fitting word of gospel. Paul Tillich's best-known sermon is undoubtedly the one titled "You Are Accepted."<sup>16</sup> He wrote it expressly to convey the gospel to people for whom words like "sin" and "forgiveness" sounded too churchy or not relevant. What does it mean to be saved? It is to be accepted by God, Tillich wrote, and then to accept each other. After Paul Tillich died and his wife went through his papers, she discovered that he had written by hand on his copy of that sermon the words "for me." Acceptance is a strong message in the New Testament: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand" (Rom

<sup>16</sup>Paul Tillich, "You Are Accepted," chapter 19 of *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Scribner, 1948).

5:1). “He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ” (Eph 1:5). “In Christ we have obtained an inheritance...” (Eph 1:11).

What does it mean to be justified, to be saved? It means to be forgiven, to be reconciled, and to be accepted—first between God and us, then all with one an-

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*“once you consider law and gospel as what has gone wrong in human life and how Jesus confronts that condition, a whole new richness opens up for preaching and evangelism”*

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other. There’s a fullness and a wideness of vision there that we need today, and the ministry of Jesus encompasses all three.

Let me go a step further with another book that was enormously formative for me. I first read Herman Stuempfle’s *Preaching Law and Gospel* when I was in the parish, in the late 1970s, and it had the same effect on me as Aulén’s book, even more so. Stuempfle wrote that in his experience our proclamation of law and gospel has been narrowed to the dynamic of confession and absolution, sin and forgiveness, guilt and forgiveness.<sup>17</sup> He said that for our present audience we need to broaden how we proclaim law and gospel, which is to say, we need to expand and enrich how we describe the work of Christ. Think of the law not only as a “hammer of judgment,” as he put it, but also as a “mirror of existence”; then the gospel is the response or the reply of Christ’s work to that condition. One of these law/gospel polarities of course is sin and forgiveness. It always will be, as long as we are sinners. But Stuempfle offers several other dimensions of how we might describe the burden of the law and the response of the gospel, Christ’s saving work, that may convey and describe for people today what Christ has done for them. For example:

- Alienation and reconciliation. We have been alienated from God and from one another, and Jesus has come to reunite those separations.
- Anxiety and certitude. In a world awash in doubt and anxiety, Jesus gives us the confidence of being loved by God, reveals God the Father to us, and shows us what human life is meant to be like.
- Despair and hope. In a world full of discouragement Jesus brings hope, an anchor to live by, the assurance, in Matthew’s last verse, that he is with us, to the close of the age.
- Transiency and homecoming. To those who think of the futility of this brief, fleeting span of life, Jesus ushers us into the kingdom of God.

Look out over your audience. Talk to your people. More importantly, talk to the people who aren’t in our pews on Sunday morning. What are their burdens? What keeps them from being the fulfilled people God wants them to be? That is the law for them. Then ask: In those circumstances, in those situations, what is the

<sup>17</sup>Herman Stuempfle, *Preaching Law and Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

word from God, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, for them? There you have evangelism for today's Mars Hills.

Once you consider law and gospel as what has gone wrong in human life and how Jesus confronts that condition, a whole new richness opens up for preaching and evangelism. You can name even more. Think of law and gospel, Christ's saving work, in terms of death and life; shame and value or acceptance; loneliness and community; boredom and meaning; sadness or depression and joy; greed and gratitude; bondage and freedom.

Now we are speaking to the people of Athens. Now we are speaking directly to the lives of the people before us, because we are speaking directly to what they're experiencing, to what they're burdened by, to what they're suffering, to what they're hoping for. With that we are doing evangelism in Anno Domini 2007, not just A.D. 100, 1517, or for that matter 1950, even though Jesus is at the center of Christian proclamation and evangelism in every one of those years, and there are always common threads to the Christian gospel throughout the centuries.

W. Paul Jones identifies six ways of understanding Christ's work.<sup>18</sup> Three are about the same as Gustaf Aulén's, but Jones adds Christ as revealer, liberator, and suffering servant or companion. Walter Brueggemann lists four ways of presenting the gospel in his *Finally Comes the Poet*.<sup>19</sup> My colleague Arland Hultgren outlined four aspects of Christ's redemptive work in *Christ and His Benefits*:

- redemption accomplished in Christ, focusing primarily on Jesus' death on the cross, by which our sin and its consequence is borne by him, most prominent in Mark and Paul;
- redemption confirmed through Christ, where God confirms his prior redemptive promises in the death and resurrection of Jesus, seen particularly in Luke (the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles);
- redemption won by Christ, as he does battle with the principalities and Satan, reconciles all things to himself or to God, and abolishes death with his own death and resurrection, seen in Colossians, Ephesians, the Pastoral Epistles, 1 Peter, Hebrews, and Revelation;
- redemption mediated by Christ, the one sent by God, who reveals the Father, and who after death and resurrection returns to the Father, who gives life to all who believe in him, the emphasis of the Gospel and Epistles of John.<sup>20</sup>

But we don't have to quote the Bible, theological textbooks, or the *Book of Concord* to learn something of the breadth of Jesus' work. We can go modern:

I suspect most of you have seen *Godspell*, a dramatic portrayal of Jesus' life in popular music. Thomas Aquinas and the chorus sing "We Beseech Thee," in which

<sup>18</sup>W. Paul Jones, *Theological Worlds: Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief* (Abingdon: Nashville, 1989).

<sup>19</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

<sup>20</sup>Arland J. Hultgren, *Christ and His Benefits: Christology and Redemption in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987).

the chorus names problems faced by humans, and Aquinas answers how Jesus meets these situations:

Sick! We come to thee for cure  
Guilty! We seek thy mercy sure  
Evil! We long to be made pure  
    We beseech thee, hear us!  
Blind! We pray that we may see  
Bound! We pray to be made free  
Stained! We pray for sanctity  
    We beseech thee, hear us!<sup>21</sup>

Or consider a recent novel. In Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, the old preacher John Ames reflects on his conversation about salvation with his friend's son Jack:

There were two further points I felt I should have made in our earlier conversations, one of them being that doctrine is not belief, it is only one way of talking about belief, and the other being that the Greek word *sozo*, which is usually translated "saved," can also mean healed, restored, that sort of thing. So the conventional translation narrows the meaning of the word in a way that can create false expectations. I thought Jack should be aware that grace is not so poor a thing that it cannot present itself in any number of ways.<sup>22</sup>

"Narrows the meaning of the word." That's what we must not do in preaching about Jesus if we wish to communicate the fullness of the gospel to our world. We cannot put Jesus in a pigeonhole and say, "*This one thing* is what Jesus came to do." His life, death, and resurrection accomplished many things. Jesus confronted and dealt with the whole spectrum of human needs: He was a sacrifice for sin, but one cannot limit his whole ministry to his death on the cross. He was an example for living, but he was more than an exalted moral teacher. He was an advocate for the poor, but he was more than a social reformer. He is "my personal savior," but he came to establish a new people, a new fellowship of believers, a community. His resurrection conquered the power of death and opened eternity for us, but his life shows us what true life on this earth is intended to be. He lived two thousand years ago, yet he lives among his people now and promises to be with us always. He was a deeply spiritual man, yet he cared passionately about everyday concerns—how we spend money, good health, how we treat each other, and so on.

In today's language Jesus is "multidimensional." Whoever you are, and whatever your situation in life is, Jesus meets you with the grand and wonderful good news of God's redemption! The Bible uses many words to describe the salvation Jesus brings: forgiveness, reconciliation, acceptance, joy, meaning, restoration, purpose, *shalom*, eternal life, and so on. One of my favorite verses about salvation in the New Testament is John 10:10, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

<sup>21</sup>Stephen Schwartz, "We Beseech Thee," lyrics at <http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/godspell/webeseechthee.htm> (accessed 10 May 2007).

<sup>22</sup>Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004) 239–240.

## CONFESSION, NOT ARGUMENT

So how do we proclaim this immensely powerful and relevant word for today's people? We don't "impose" our faith on others, or manipulate people's emotions to produce some kind of fix that will fade away in the light of tomorrow. We certainly can't prove it.

Here's another paragraph from Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*; again the old pastor is reflecting on his preaching:

So my advice is this—don't look for proofs. Don't bother with them at all. They are never sufficient to the question, and they're always a little impertinent, I think, because they claim for God a place within our conceptual grasp. And they will likely sound wrong to you even if you convince someone else with them....It was Coleridge who said Christianity is a life, not a doctrine, words to that effect.<sup>23</sup>

So what is proclamation today? In short, it's confession. We confess our faith wherever and whenever we can. My homiletics partner David Lose wrote his PhD dissertation, now a book, on how to proclaim the gospel to a postmodern, secular, and relativistic world. The title is "Confessing Jesus Christ." Lose's point: We simply confess our faith and let the chips fall where they may, or where the Spirit blows them. Our proclamation will include catechesis, criticism, exhortation, motivation, but fundamentally, in Lose's words, it is "the public practice of confessing faith in Jesus Christ."<sup>24</sup>

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***"So what is proclamation today? In short, it's confession."***

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The biblical paradigm for evangelism today is found in John 1, at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. Andrew heard John the Baptist point to Jesus and say, "Behold the Lamb of God." So Andrew asked Jesus, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" Jesus simply said, "Come and see." The next day Jesus saw Philip and said, "Follow me." Philip found Nathanael and said, "We have found the one spoken of in the law and the prophets." Nathanael said, "Can anything good come out of Galilee?" Philip said, "Come and see" (John 1:43–46).

"Come and see." See for yourself who Jesus was, what Jesus did, how he treated people. Just "come and see." For now we are not going to argue about it. For now we are not going to explain all the phrases in the Nicene Creed. We won't tell you about the *communicatio idiomatum*. Just come and see. Jesus is my Lord, Jesus is master of my life, and Jesus is for you—just come and see.

Some of you have heard me tell a story about my son Paul when he was in confirmation class. I was explaining about the second article of the creed. In the car on the way home Paul asked, "Why does all that have to be so complicated?" "What's complicated?" I said. "Well, all that stuff in the creed about Jesus: 'the

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 179.

<sup>24</sup>David J. Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 3.

only Son of God, eternally begotten from the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father.’ It’s way too complicated.” I said, “So what would you say?” He replied—and this coming from a boy who liked Coca-Cola—“I’d just say, Jesus is ‘it.’”

Amid all the accolades paid to the late Pope John Paul II, one of his biographers, George Weigel, put it best. He said of the late pope, “He was a thoroughly radically committed Christian disciple, who really believed, as he put it, that ‘Jesus Christ is the answer to the question that is every human life.’” Then he added “All the rest followed from that.”<sup>25</sup> There can be no better epitaph for any Christian than to say that “Jesus Christ is the answer to the question that is every human life.”

Peter Storey is the retired Methodist bishop of Johannesburg and Soweto, South Africa. He was the prison chaplain at the Robben Island Prison, where Nelson Mandela was sent after being sentenced to life imprisonment, and the two became friends and spiritual brothers. When Nelson Mandela was released after twenty-seven years in prison and became the President of South Africa in 1994, he asked Peter Storey, along with Desmond Tutu, to establish the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a means of reconciling the hatred and hostility of the races, the first time such an exercise in social reconciliation had been tried on such a vast, national scale.

Peter Storey visited Luther Seminary a few years ago, while he was spending time at Asbury Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. I asked him why he picked Asbury Seminary, and he said, “Because at Asbury Seminary they still really believe that Jesus changes lives.” My immediate thought was, I hope that can be said of Luther Seminary as well! ☩

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<sup>25</sup>Quoted in David van Biema, “Defender of the Faith,” *Time*, 11 April 2005, 36.