

**SHARING AND MINISTERING IN THE CURRENT CULTURAL CLIMATE
CORNERSTONE URC EDMONTON (ALBERTA, CANADA), MAY 3–5, 2019
DR. ALAN D. STRANGE, SPEAKER**

Talk 1: What’s So Great about the Great Commission? The Hope We have in Christ (Matthew 28:18-20; I Peter 3:15).

- I. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20).
 - A. What’s so great about the Great Commission?
 1. Certainly, its breadth—gathering the saints from every nation.
 - a. Evangelizing all peoples: first the Jew, then the Gentile. This is what’s involved in baptizing. People are baptized when they profess their faith (and then their children are eligible for such).
 - b. Gentile inclusion means the realization of the hope of the ages, back to the call of Abraham. The gathering of the church is not Plan B, but the fulfillment of all that God ever promised of Old. The “church age” is not a parenthesis but the kingdom come into its own.
 2. But also its depth—perfecting those saints as well.
 - a. Not only baptizing, but “teaching them to obey whatsoever I have commanded you.”
 - b. The gospel involves trust *and* obedience, with the latter being the ever true fruit of a living faith. We don’t obey in order to be rightly related to God once again; rather, we obey because we *are* rightly related to God, if we trust in Christ alone.
 - c. And so we go out and we point people to the one who has paid it all and then call them to live for Him out of gratitude, not so that they will be saved but because they are saved.
 3. Having said all of that, then, it’s evident that what’s so great about the great commission is its Lord, even more than the breadth or depth of it.
 - a. It’s great because the One who commissions the church to do this great work is the One who has saved them by His person and work.
 - b. The One, who though crucified, has been raised and invested with “all authority in heaven and on earth.” And on that basis, He calls and empowers us to go about this great work.
 - c. This is most encouraging: the one who calls the church to this task of gathering and perfecting the saints until the end of the world empowers us to it and is with us in it.

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d. This is the most challenging work to which one can be called, but it is not something that we do in our own strength but in the power and strength of the One to whom all power has been given.

B. Who is that He thus empowers and by what means?

1. He empowers the eleven as the pillars and foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20). Thus, representatively, He commissions the church for all times to carry out this task.

a. But are all called to baptize and to teach? The Apostles and their successors in the ordinary office-bearers were called to this (the ministers and elders of the church). Everyone in the church is not called to carry out every aspect of this.

b. It's not correct, however, to say that the commission is given only to these office-bearers: It is given to the whole church and to the general office of believer, though certain aspects are carried out only by those who hold special office.

c. The whole church, though, is involved in this work of gathering and perfecting the saints to the end of the age.

2. What of the means?

a. The one to whom all power is given says something so important: "I am with you always, even to the close of the age." But how is He with us? He goes back to heaven at this point.

b. Ah, yes, but Father and Son (John 14:23) come and make their home with us, at and by Pentecost, in the power of the Holy Spirit. He is with us by His Spirit and His Spirit is the one who empowers the means of grace, so that Christ is really present, by the Spirit, in the Word, sacraments, and prayer. So when he says that He is with us even to the end we should understand this to mean personally and corporately by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who works through certain means, what we call "means of grace."

c. The Reformed Confessions (BC 29, HC LD 25, particularly WLC 155) tells us that He is powerfully among us "especially in the preaching." This is where it's happening (pointing to where we sit as a congregation), Lord's Day by Lord's Day and where you and everyone needs to be, in this or a like place, hearing the risen Christ speak by the mouthpiece of the minister in the power of the Holy Spirit.

d. This is particularly how Christ is with you to the end: in the means of grace that He has appointed, in and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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II. If the Great Commission is not carried out, however, by everyone equally (not all being called to baptize or teach), is there something to which all Christians, whether in special office or not, but as part of the general office of Christian, are called?

A. Though all Christians are not called in the narrow sense to “preach the gospel,” every Christian is called to the apologetic task, to the defense of the faith. The great *locus classicus* of apologetics is 1 Peter 3:15. In that text Peter instructs his hearers/readers to “sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.”

1. The context of 1 Peter 3:15 requires our attention.

a. In the beginning of the chapter (vv. 1-6), Peter addresses wives whose husbands “do not obey the Word,” teaching them that their husbands, nonetheless, “without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives.” Peter here encourages inferiors that recalcitrant superiors may be won not by “throwing pearls before swine” (as our Lord put it in Matthew 7)—by forcing the gospel on those who do not wish to hear it—but by living a godly life before them.

b. These instructions of Peter have implications beyond husband/wife relations to all human relationships: we have no call to demand that either our superiors or our equals listen to us as we seek to give them the gospel. If they do not wish to hear our words, they can see our lives. Some apologists clearly recognize this at a number of places, referring to this as an “apologetic of good deeds.” They also rightly understand that misdeeds on the part of Christians who attempt to defend the faith undermine their own witness, counteracting their apologetic efforts.

c. Thus the problem that we often encounter in our apologetic efforts is never a deficiency in the message we are defending but our own deficiency of living lives consistent with the gospel message, that is, our failure to behave as those transformed by God and conformed to his Word (especially if we’re hypocritical, one of the big problems of the “religious”: we’re “moral,” but we don’t love our neighbor, who is not just the one who looks and thinks like us, cf. The Good Samaritan of Luke 10).

2. In verses 8-14, Peter continues and expands on the theme of the apologetical importance of living a godly life.

a. In vv. 8-12, he exhorts the followers of Christ to be tenderhearted, courteous, to speak no evil, and to seek peace and to pursue it.

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b. In v. 13, Peter asks, “Who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good?” In this, Peter argues that the godly behavior of believers is no threat to society’s welfare, but rather a blessing to society.

c. Nevertheless, there are those who hate believers merely because they do good works. The world, in its opposition to the good, will persecute believers for righteousness’ sake (something more evident now than before, in our current cultural climate), even as they put to death the Lord of glory, not for crimes that he had committed but because they envied him (Mark 15:10).

d. Even if one does suffer for righteousness’ sake, Peter writes in v. 14, one is blessed, and he further encourages believers: “Do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.”

B. The only way to avoid being intimidated in the face of the threats that occasionally come to Christians (precisely because they are living in accordance with God’s Word) is to set apart the Lord God in one’s heart (v. 15a). That is to say, one must consciously bow to the Lord.

1. When one bows to the Lord, when one fears Christ, then and only then, may one know the peace and comfort that allows one to answer with meekness and fear (v. 15c).

a. When we fear God, to paraphrase Cromwell, we need fear none other.

b. In the strength and confidence that the fear of God produces, we can give a defense to everyone who asks us a reason for our hope (v. 15b).

c. Such is the dynamic of apologetics according to Peter: we are to live in a godly way, a way that will arrest the attention even of those to whom we might otherwise have no verbal witness; so living for the Lord that our persecutors will at some point be prompted to inquire of us as to our hope.

2. This is especially so when people see us persecuted and yet turning away from evil to do good, as Paul puts it in Romans 12, “not returning evil for evil.”

a. Apologetics, then, as set forth in 1 Peter 3:15, occurs in a context of suffering in which even our persecutors cannot but inquire as to the reason that we have hope, though to their minds we have no outward reason for hope whatsoever. Important to remember in our “post-Christian” times as the faith comes increasingly under fire.

b. Our quiet, confident reply, speaking of our hope and trust in Christ who has done it all for us, is the quintessence of humble apologetics. And it can have

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this meekness because we have set Christ apart as Lord, firmly convinced of the truth and rightness of God and his Word.

c. We can be humble when we are certain of our footing, only then are we saved from the need to be sophisticated and clever; instead, we can answer with the simplicity, confidence, and directness that come from a genuine meekness and fear of the Lord.

d. Remember, we have His own presence with us, in and by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the Word, sacraments, and prayer. He is with us even in the current cultural climate, gathering and perfecting the saints, though all might appear lost to us. And we are to be ready to give to any who ask a reason of the hope within. Because we have Christ within, as the hope of glory, we can testify to and of Christ to this dark, needy, dying world. Amen.

Talk 2: Nothing but Christ (I Cor. 2:1-16) and Being Effective Ambassadors (II Cor. 5:16-21)

Paul, taking up the Lord's Great Commission (as the Apostle to the Gentiles) and Peter's challenge to answer according to the hope within, sets forth Christ and Him crucified as the sole interpretative lens of all reality.

We should answer from the perspective of that hope within, Christ crucified, risen, and coming again. This is how Paul answered (I Cor. 2: 1-16)—with the mind of Christ.

1. Paul here is resolved to know nothing save Christ and Him crucified (v. 2).

a. This appears to be a very narrow resolve, and it is in a certain sense: it is a resolve to allow the centerpiece of the atonement—Christ's death on the cross for our sin to appease God's wrath—to form the single lens focus. This is so much our concern, there's a sense in which it's not simply our predominant concern but our sole concern.

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b. One might wrongly infer that such a single-focus lens means that Paul, and our, line of vision would be very narrow, super-spiritual, and that we would be indifferent if told of Aunt Polly's rheumatism or Cousin Joe's impoverishment (as items for prayer and action).

2. Not at all, however. Paul's narrowed focus to Christ and his saving work **becomes that lens through which Paul views all reality.**

a. Thus, in fact, the determination to know nothing but Christ and Him crucified is all comprehensive; rather than having an ultimately narrowing effect, it becomes that through which we view everything.

b. All of reality is seen in the light of the cross. Rather than being an odd, singular focus that fades into the background when approaching the rest of life, the cross becomes the shadow cast over all reality.

c. We see everything, in other words, from the perspective of the saving work of Christ. That becomes the light that enlightens all. Apart from this light, all is darkness and confusion. With it, all is properly illumined.

B. This passage in I Corinthians 2 was famously noted by Dr. Richard Gaffin as being a kind of exegetical warrant for our apologetic approach. This is the essence of so-called presuppositional or covenantal apologetics.

1. Only those who are regenerated by the Holy Spirit properly understand spiritual things and such an understanding is requisite to a proper understanding of anything properly or ultimately. This is the teaching of vv. 6-16 and the great contrast (antithesis) pointed out between regenerate and unregenerate.

a. Surely, the unbeliever often has breathtaking understanding of many things proximately (physics, calculus, economics, etc.) and possesses a variety of remarkable skills (manifest in music, art, sports, etc.).

b. At the same time, such a one does not understand one single thing ultimately (and that the foundation of all thought is Christ, in whom is hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge), since they do not have the Spirit (that searches the deep things) and thus lack the mind of Christ.

c. Here is the solution to the dilemma of how we know what we know. The world says that we know either through rationalism (Plato) or empiricism (Aristotle), but Paul makes it clear here (2: 9-10) that it's not by our thinking or our senses that we know what we know, but by the general and special revelation of God. God enables us to sense and think, to be sure, but God alone is the true source of all our knowledge (and Christ of all our wisdom).

d. So much for the smart boys (2:8, who crucified the Lord of glory), because they have not the Spirit (v. 10-13) and are not able to understand, to

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spiritually discern, lacking the mind of Christ. No wonder your unbelieving neighbor does not receive your witness. They need the Spirit and Christ to understand the Word, the starting point for spiritual, and all ultimate, understanding.

2. And the foundational nature of this—the Word of God being the proper starting point for all knowledge—is not new to the New Testament: the Wisdom literature teaches us, in a host of ways, that the “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10 and elsewhere).
 - a. What’s new is the specific Christocentric content, in whom is hidden “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2).
 - b. This means that, in an ultimate sense, our catechized children know more than the most learned unbelievers.
 - c. Thus we should not despise but pity and pray for those who lack such, though they ferociously oppose us. We are, as Paul says in the next letter, representatives our king to this dark and confuse world.

II. Faithful and Effective Ambassadors (II Cor. 5:16-21): MS Sermon.

- A. We are called to be faithful: An ambassador must be faithful. This, like the Great Commission, applies in the most obvious and immediate way to those called to be ministers of the gospel. But it applies derivatively to us all (as does the GC and, more directly, I Peter 3:15).
 1. In some ways faithfulness might seem easy for those confessional and orthodox.
 - a. After all, being loving and caring is thought to be our challenge; the need, however, to be faithful shouldn’t simply be taken for granted, particularly given the times. Faithfulness is crucial for an ambassador, who represents not himself and his own views, but those of his sovereign. Without faithfulness he’s nothing (GS illus.; “no, this is your country!”). We act on Christ’s behalf.
 - b. We are tempted (and pressured) in such times to compromise the gospel.
 - c. In our politically-correct, highly-charged, intersectional culture.
 2. Especially doctrines like those either directly in or implied by our text: the doctrines associated with the commission that we are given in the ministry of reconciliation.
 - a. That we need reconciliation implies sin and alienation from a holy God. But this, and that we can do nothing to better ourselves ultimately, is offensive.
 - b. That the sole remedy is Christ and his active and passive obedience only adds to the offense, especially when we note that otherwise we remain alienated from God and thus liable to eternal punishment.
 - c. We must remain faithful in the demands that we compromise this exclusivism in the face of inclusivism or pluralism, not to mention all the “noness” these days.
- B. Our plea then must be made in a way most likely to be heard, which is to say that an ambassador must not only be faithful but must also be effective. He must speak both the language whence comes and the *lingua franca* of the land he’s now in.

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1. Not in any compromised way.
 - a. We are, after all, representatives of heaven and its message.
 - b. But we need to deliver the message in a language that can be understood and with a clarity that cannot be escaped. This is why I support Bibles and confessions in the vernacular. And preaching that makes clear that this is the living voice of our risen Savior. The message of our King must be clearly communicated.
2. The faithful ambassador not only truly represents his sovereign (King Jesus, in our case), but must know something of the culture and customs of those to whom he is sent (so he won't be like *The Ugly American*).
 - a. If he knows nothing of the culture, his effectiveness is limited/curtailed. Thus study to know such, even if it's not your cup of tea or offensive to you. Know enough to be able to ask questions and engage in the break room ("why do you like that movie, game, music, etc.?). Then research if unfamiliar to find its appeal, to see what real underlying itch is being wrongheadedly scratched. Don't just despise those of the world (a great temptation for us), who like ungodly internet sites, excessive gaming, bad movies, worse music, and are given over to drugs and illicit sex and sexual confusion (ssa, trans-genderism, etc.). Seek to understand what they're getting at, aiming at, in all their sin and folly.
 - b. We can both faithfully represent Christ and seek to understand those with whom we share the gospel. Our aim ought always to be: how can I best share the gospel in the time and place in which God has put me?

Talk 3: Engaging Unbelief (Acts 17 and 25) and the Resurrection (Matthew 28: 1-17)

How can we be most faithful (consistent) and thus most effective, actually engaging and challenging our hearers with the gospel? By an apologetics (defense of the faith) that is in keeping with the substance and method of Scripture.

- A. An introduction to covenantal (biblical) apologetics
 1. It's not some sort of academic preface to the gospel or rationalistic engagement of someone, like Dawkins or Hawking, who opposed the gospel (a discussion of philosophy). Few people are properly qualified to do that.

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- a. Rather, one shares the gospel and then answers the objections raised to it (the later part is apologetics).
 - b. Apologetics itself is a two-pronged enterprise: a defense of the faith (answering objections) and the demolition of unbelief (engaging in an internal critique).
 - c. You show that the problems that people have with the gospel are not problems within a biblical worldview but are problems that arise because of the rejection of a biblical worldview (begun by Adam and continued by all of us who remain in rebellion against God).
 - d. You may also, as able, go over onto the unbeliever's ground and show how that within his own worldview he cannot account for science, morality, laws of logic, love, beauty, etc. He likely affirms all these things, but they are not consistent with his worldview and he must borrow from the Christian worldview to have all that he holds most dear.
 - e. We maintain that the Bible is God's Word, and when we have the mind of Christ, we see things properly through the lens of Scripture. Otherwise, the "natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, neither indeed can he, because they are spiritually discerned." (I Cor. 2).
2. It is what we see Paul engaging in at the Areopagus (Acts 17) and in his testimonies before the Romans authorities at and after his arrest (especially before Agrippa—Acts 25).
 - a. Paul understands the distinction between reason and revelation in these passages: revelation alone teaches about Jesus and the resurrection (Acts 17 and 25).
 - b. Here we also see common grace and the antithesis: Man lives and moves and has his being in God (Acts 17) and at the same time, while knowing the truth (that there is a God), suppresses it in unrighteousness (Romans 1), falsely worshipping him (Acts 17), showing the antagonism (antithesis) between truth and error.
- B. Perhaps nowhere is this more sharply seen than in the earlier part of Matthew 28 that we didn't look at in the first talk—about the Resurrection (read).
1. Note here how improbable the counter-story is here.
 - a. Traditional apologetics takes the tact, "prove the Resurrection, and you prove that Jesus is who He claimed to be—God come in the flesh."

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- b. And our evidentialist friends are not wrong to point out that the lies about the resurrection are palpable nonsense.
 - 1.) The counter-story that the guards were to tell is that the timorous disciples come upon sleeping guards and stole the body.
 - 2.) How would the frightened disciples pull this off against such a troop?
 - 3.) If the guards are asleep, how do they know what happened?
 - 4.) What did the disciples as observant Jews do with the body (all admit that the tomb was empty and no dead body discoverable or a body would have been produced)?
 - 5.) And all the disciples gave their lives for what they knew to be a lie (which would be the case if they stole a dead body)?
2. These guards, better witnesses to the factuality of the resurrection than any of us could ever hope to be, come running breathless to the religious leaders and present them with the most compelling evidence ever that “demands a verdict.”
 - a. Note that the religious leaders did not say, “Oy, vey: we put to death the Lord of glory,” nor did they accuse the guards of lying (What motive would they have for lying? And if the disciples really had come and stolen the body the lives of the guards would have been forfeit; but the religious leaders could not put them to death for what they knew to be a lie—i.e., the absurd contention that disciples came and stole the body).
 - b. They do not seem to miss a beat in spinning the story and concocting the lie—the counter-story. Why? Why is this their reaction to what the guards tell them?
 - c. Because they refuse to bow the knee to Jesus. It’s as if the religious say in response to the guards: **“Nevertheless, WE WILL NOT HAVE THIS MAN TO RULE OVER US.”**
3. The religious leaders do not respond to the guards’ account of the resurrection of Jesus as they do because of any lack of evidence. There’s evidence aplenty. It’s staring them in the face. They don’t even question the evidence.
 - a. Rather, they respond as they do because (all the evidence in the world be hanged), they refuse to have this man to rule over them, they refuse to bow the knee to Christ. This is where man in his unbelief lives.

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- b. One day, as Philippians 2 says, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. But it will then be too late if it's the first time. Remember this.
- c. Now is the time to bow and to receive Him in the day of mercy and grace. And this is what we endeavor to do—hold forth Christ as His ambassadors while it is still the day of grace and beseech men and women, boys and girls, “Be reconciled to Christ.” Bow the knee to Him. Receive Him who is the Lord of all.
- d. And you need to know that people fail to do this, refuse to do this, not because of any lack of evidence, but because they will not have this man to rule over them.
- e. Psalm 2 gets it right: “Kiss the Son, lest He be angry and you perish in the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him.” This is what we call those about us to do, and there's evidence aplenty.
- f. Remember, as Jesus himself said, in Luke 16, “They have Moses and the prophets; let then hear them.” And the rich man said, “if one goes from the dead, they will repent.” (Obviously an evidentialist). And Abraham (a presuppositionalist) said, “if they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.”
- g. And Lazarus did, and Jesus did, and they remained un-persuaded by that alone. Only when the Spirit of God opens eyes to see and hearts to receive will men bow to Him saying as did believing Thomas, “My Lord and My God.”
- h. Pray for the Spirit to work to open eyes and hearts, in here and out there. Amen.

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Additional Material: Why We Believe in God (“Covenantal Apologetics”) and Dialogue with Unbelievers.

I. Why We Believe in God

- A. NH primer article by Alan D. Strange on “Why We Believe in God,” http://www.opc.org/nh.html?article_id=259.
- B. Additional NH article (a bit more advanced), “The Witness Needed by a Weary World,” http://www.opc.org/nh.html?article_id=840.

II. Dialogs from K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of our Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013).

- A. Dialog with the Humanist, pp. 111-22.
- B. Dialog with the Atheist on evil, pp. 180-92.
- C. Dialog with the Naturalist/Scientist (Daniel Dennett), pp. 210-17.
- D. Dialog with the Muslim, pp. 235-58.

Greg Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith* (Texarkana, TX: Covenant Media Foundation, 1996). This is a fine primer by a master debater and practitioner from a Van Tilian perspective; a great compliment to Oliphint’s *Covenantal Apologetics*. See also his debates, especially with Stein: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anGAazNCfdY>.

Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998). A most useful explication of much of Van Til’s thought.

Steven B. Cowan, *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000). This is a helpful comparative volume setting forth the various views employed by evangelicals currently, with critical interaction. John Frame expositis the presuppositional method, whose several works on Van Til and his apologetics should be consulted, especially his *Apologetics to the Glory of God*.

K. Scott Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith: Philosophy in the Service of Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006). This is a more advanced work from a Van Tilian perspective.

Richard Pratt, *Every Thought Captive: A Study Manual for the Defense of Christian Truth* (P&R Publishing, 1979). This remains perhaps the clearest introduction to apologetics.

Mitch Stokes, *A Shot of Faith (to the Head): Be a Confident Believer in an Age of Cranky Atheists* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012). This is an accessible explication of the essential approach of Alvin Plantinga, with all of its attendant strengths and weaknesses (strong on its critique of naturalism; weak on the necessity of Christianity for the intelligibility of all life and thought). Plantinga’s *Where the Conflict Really Lies* is an excellent critique of naturalism.

Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed. (P&R Publishing, 2008). This remains the classic work by the master.