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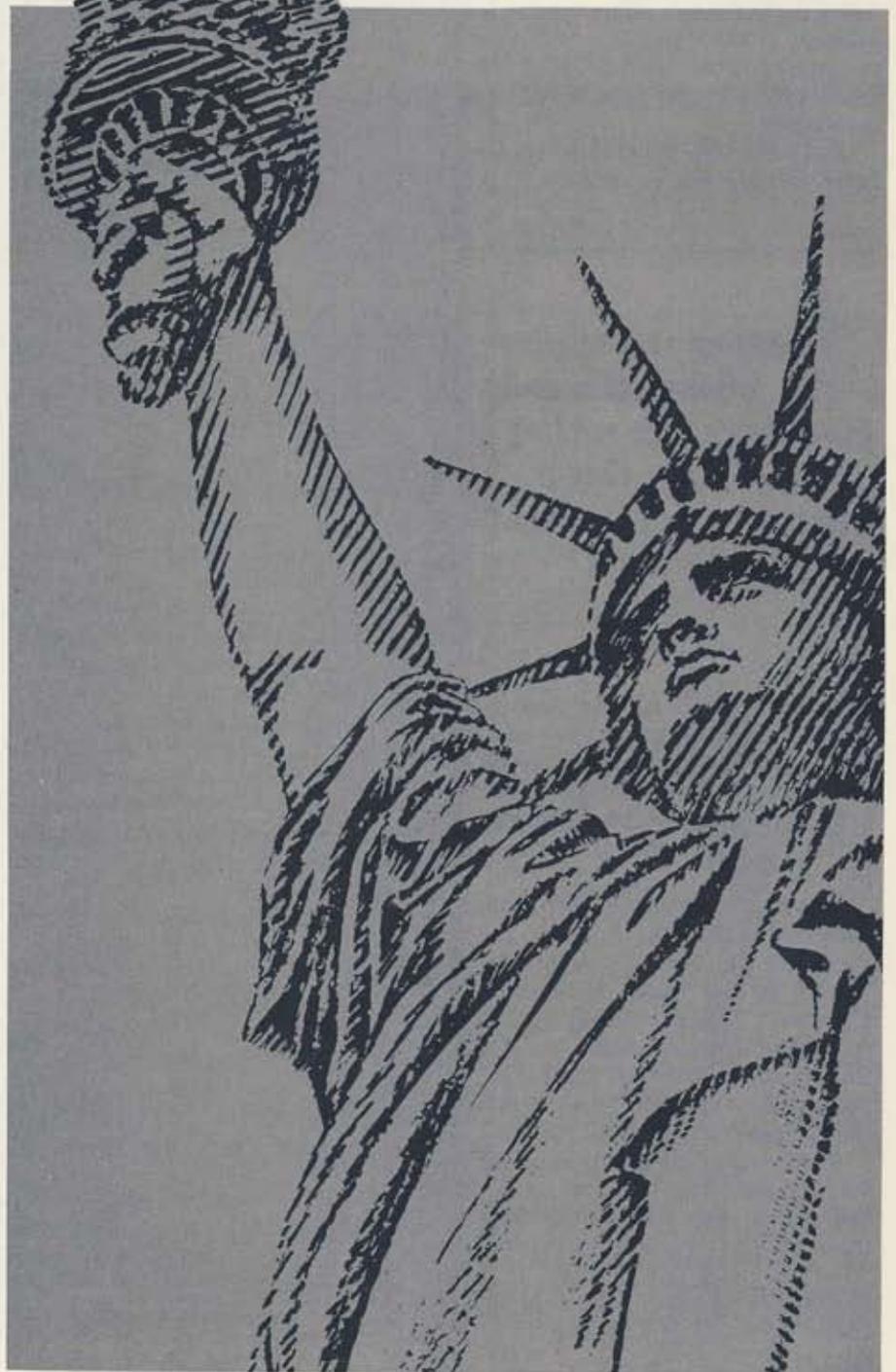
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Evangelism in a Pluralistic Society

by Wayne A. Detzler

How do we proclaim a singular gospel to a do-your-own-thing culture, where there are as many suggested paths to God as there are people?



America—refuge for freedom, melting pot for multitudes. Emma Lazarus described America best in "The New Colossus":
 Give me your tired, your poor,
 Your huddled masses yearning to
 breath free,
 The wretched refuse of your teem-
 ing shore,
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-
 tossed, to me,
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

America is a sanctuary for the oppressed, whoever their oppressor. In colonial times those persecuted for their religious convictions were hounded out of England and Holland. Their will to worship freely made them a threat to the established religion of the Old World, but in America they could worship in accordance with the Bible.

Throughout the last two centuries, people left Europe, Asia, the Far East—wherever tyranny reigned—and came to our shores in pursuit of freedom.

Today America is a collection of minorities, a "patchwork" population. Boston is one of the major Irish cities in the world. New York vies with the Jewish city of Tel Aviv. Chicago has a thriving Polish community, and Los Angeles has a large Mexican population.

Cultural diversity is paralleled by religious variety. Besides the large Roman Catholic community, there are millions of Protestants. No country has as many Baptists as America, and the sons and daughters of Wesley flourish here too. Presbyterians in America outnumber their counterparts in Scotland, the home of John Knox. There is a strong Episcopal membership here, to say nothing of the Holiness and Pentecostal churches. While 34 percent of all Americans make profession of the New Birth, the rest have a myriad of different beliefs.

Some salute this religious diversity. They pride themselves on relativism. Their motto is: "live and let live." The relativist sees no right or wrong, just various shades of sincerity. According to Os Guinness, the astute English observer, "The increase in choice and change has led to a decrease in commitment and continuity" ("The Subversive Society," *Pastoral Renewal*, vol. 7, number 7, February 1983, p.58).

Professor Charles W. Forman of Yale University adds, "The main body of church people, those who are fully part of the larger culture, are showing signs of increasing relativism in their thinking" ("Religious Pluralism and the Mission of the Church," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 7, January 1982, p.5).

Casual, nominal Christians see such pluralism as a pleasant part of American life. Because they are not committed to



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the Scriptures and their absolute truth, they see no need for spiritual absolutes. The reaction of most church members is yawning indifference.

However, born-again believers in the Lord Jesus Christ view America's varied society as a homegrown mission field. Like the Lord Jesus, we "look on the fields; for they are white already unto harvest" (John 4:35).

The Bible does not teach that all roads lead to heaven. Man-made paths are dead-end streets; Jesus is the only true way (John 14:6). Therefore our reaction is not relativism, but evangelism. We take the Lord seriously when

He says: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Our clear message to the mixed multitude is composed of five building blocks.

A Bible to Believe

The first principle of our proclamation must be the absolute inerrancy of the Scriptures. We proclaim a singular gospel message to our pluralistic society. There is no "pick and choose" path to peace with God.

Some tell us that God speaks through wise religious leaders such as the pope or a bishop. Others insist that God has revealed Himself in religious books such as the Unification Church's *Divine Principle*. The Arabs in our midst affirm that Mohammad is the prophet who tells the truth about God. Eastern mystics meditate their way to another version of religious truth.

The Bible stands in bold contrast to all these. As the Lord completed His life on earth, He assured His disciples that the gospel was the only source for saving truth (John 20:31). No further revelation is necessary, and none is valid. If we are to evangelize effectively we must have confidence in our message.

Sin to Shun

Religious Americans have dozens of ways to deny sin. The tax evader is not sinning unless he is caught. An adulterer justifies his infidelity by saying his wife is a shrew. Teenagers blow their brains with pills, and sophisticated socialites do the same with cocaine and cocktails. Proper pew-warmers unleash gossip-laden tongues and torpedo the church. Our pluralistic society offers a multitude of ways to disguise sin instead of calling it by name.

God says that all have sinned, and sin is not just a "social sickness." According to the Scriptures, sin is falling short of God's glory (Rom. 3:23). Joseph, wise prime minister of Egypt, realized that sin was an affront against God Himself (Gen. 39:9). So whether it is "white-collar" computer larceny or "blue-collar" blasphemy, the Bible lumps it all together as sin. The Scriptures take sin seriously, and so must we. Sin crucified Christ.

Price to Pay

People try different solutions for sin. Some take it to a priest and hope he can find forgiveness for them. Some seek a psychiatrist who will assure

them that they are perfectly normal and therefore innocent. Others seek scapegoats, in the tradition of Adam and Eve. As someone said: "Adam blamed Eve for the Fall. Eve blamed the serpent. And the serpent did not have a leg to stand on!"

While some deny the danger of sin, others look for forms of penance. The Muslims pray five times a day and fast their way through Ramadan. Humanists hope that social activism will set their record straight. Millions make their way to religious services, seeking to amass favor with God. However, when all is said and done, none of this can deliver them from their guilt.

All that can be done to pay for sin has been done by the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul said that while we were yet sinners the Saviour died for us (Rom. 5:8). To the religious Jew, Paul said that Christ took the Cross's curse to free him from the law (Gal. 3:13). Christ's Crucifixion is the only way to wash away sin's stain (Acts 4:12). Our gospel includes an all-embracing answer to man's sin—the Cross of Christ.

Confession to Make

In a do-your-own-thing culture, there are as many suggested paths to God as there are people. Some believe that keeping the "golden rule," will open heaven's door. If we do our best, God will do the rest. Multitudes place their trust in a religious person—pastor,

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priest, or rabbi. Others have placed their trust in some new guru who promises peace through meditation. Still others are simply following the religion of their forefathers. The vast multitude just simply ignore eternity altogether.

The way to peace with God is not through good works, good ideas, or

good intentions. The only way to God is through His Son (John 10:9-10). Whether one looks at the Old Testament or the New, the story is the same: "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Joel 2:32 and Rom. 10:13). Placing trust in any other way is as disastrous as trying to cross the Atlantic in an inner tube.

Church to Join

A neglected part of our gospel is the follow-up. God's institution for maturing Christians is the church. Some think the church is a formal denomination, one of the great Reformation Churches of Europe. Others think it is a close-knit group where some tyrannical teacher dominates all the members, a cult devoid of divine approval. Multitudes feel the church is divorced from reality and uninterested in human need. Some feel that the church is nothing more or less than a human organization with more than its share of human faults.

The Bible knows nothing of this sort of church. Jesus Christ is building His church out of people who confess that He is God, come in the flesh (Matt. 16:16-18). Christ's church is composed of twice-born believers. They are drawn together not by a powerful person but by the Lord of Glory. Their worship is offered not to a man but to the Son of Man. They love each other because they are His disciples (John 13:34-35).

Throughout this great land there are thousands of such churches. Some are in city centers, and some are even housed behind storefronts. In the suburbs there are large, thriving churches where Christ is the cornerstone. In fact, the largest and liveliest churches in America are the Bible-believing fellowships.

How do we evangelize a pluralistic society? We proclaim the name of Jesus Christ. To a multitude starved for truth, we offer the truth of God's inerrant Word. For millions mired down in sin, we offer a Saviour who can snatch them out. Amid the confusion and conflict we call people to meet at the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, and He draws all.

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*"The entrance
of thy Word
giveth light."*



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