

Hope For the City  
Urban Subversive Fulfilment

Part 1

## 1. The Need

I'm going to be writing about the need to reach our inner cities and council estates with the good news about Jesus and his death and resurrection. This series of articles arises out of a growing recognition that there is a great and terrible gap in our gospel witness. To be fair, Gospel witness in the UK is, generally speaking, hard work with only a small percentage of people coming to faith and aside from one or two churches, the story often seems to be about maintenance and decline. However, we are doing even worse on our estates and in our inner cities.

### Unreached

In his book "Unreached", Tim Chester tells how,

"I once attended a lecture at which the speaker showed a map of my city, Sheffield. The council wards were coloured different shades according to a series of social indicators: educational achievement, household income, benefit recipients, social housing, criminal activity, and so on. Slide after slide showed that the east side of the city was the needy, socially deprived half, compared to the more prosperous west. Where are all the churches? Counting all the various tribes of evangelicalism, the large churches are on the west side. The working class and deprived areas of our cities are not being reached with the gospel."<sup>1</sup>

This is backed up by further statistical research:

"Research conducted by Tearfund in 2007 shows that church going in the UK is a middle - class pursuit. Adults in social grades AB (professionals, senior and middle management) are over-represented among both regular and occasional churchgoers. Meanwhile adults of social grade C2 and D (semi-skilled and unskilled manual) have the highest proportion of non-churched."<sup>2</sup>

If we seem to be seeing any fruit from Gospel work, it often seems to be amongst students and graduates. It is encouraging to hear about growing Christian Unions, of conversions at CU mission events and large churches in university areas. Some of those churches are encouraging church planting as graduates move away from university accommodation into other parts of the city. However, there tends to be a fixed migration into more prosperous and suburban areas. Council estates and inner-city terraces tend to be off the main route.

It is worth remembering that whilst we often hear that about 80% of church members have received university education, only 32.6% of 18 year olds went to University in 2017.<sup>3</sup> This is important. There have been increasing numbers quoted as going into higher education and the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) annual measure suggests that, **on probability**, 49% of the population will enter Higher or Further education by the time they are 30.<sup>4</sup> However, the HEIPR figure is only a probability, not a certainty, and furthermore:

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<sup>1</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 10.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/largest-ever-proportion-uks-18-year-olds-entered-higher-education-2017-ucas-data-reveals> accessed 20/06/2018

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/jun/04/higher-education-participation-data-analysis> accessed 20/6/2018.

“Higher education in this context means every kind of accredited higher education course, from two-year foundation degrees delivered at a local further education college, to PhDs from Cambridge.”<sup>5</sup>

This means that whilst a lot of people will be involved in further education of some kind, not all will attend university and not all will receive degrees. If our focus is predominantly on mission to students and graduates, then we are effectively forgetting about the majority of the population who will never have the opportunity to attend a university mission and are unlikely to find themselves living next door to the graduate church plant member.

### **Trickle Down?**

I believe that the disproportionate make up of our churches is at least partly due bad decisions made, particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chester comments that the church wasn't always biased to the prosperous:

“It was not always like this. The Great Awakening was largely a working-class movement. Although its leaders were middle class, the establishment treated their open air preaching with scorn.”<sup>6</sup>

He goes on to suggest the following factors that led to a situation where the church reached an educated elite at the expense of the working classes:

1. The C of E parish system is not geared up for urbanisation.<sup>7</sup>
2. Going to church is seen as for respectable people who dress up in their Sunday best.<sup>8</sup>
3. “The last century has seen an explosion of entertainment opportunities.” The church is no longer the communal focal point.<sup>9</sup>
4. We have focused on strategies of reaching “people of influence” such as students and graduates.<sup>10</sup>
5. Churches are geared up to reaching people through social networks and friendship evangelism which doesn't fit in with working class people being more tied into local communities.<sup>11</sup>
6. Working class people become Christians and then tend to engage with things that identify them as aspirational leading to a sense of becoming middle class and leaving their community behind.<sup>12</sup>

Some of those factors may seem unavoidable but there are some that we could have done something about. In particular, we need to take note of point 4 – the belief that by focusing on a strategy of reaching those with influence, this would lead to God raising up a generation of church leaders who would ensure that the Gospel went out. Back in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the focus was on reaching public school boys through summer camps targeted at the elite who were expected to go on to Oxbridge and from there to be politicians, captains of Industry, vicars and

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/jun/04/higher-education-participation-data-analysis> accessed 20/6/2018.

<sup>6</sup> Chester, *Unreached*,10.

<sup>7</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Chester, *Unreached*,12.

<sup>9</sup> Chester, *Unreached*,12.

<sup>10</sup> Chester, *Unreached*,13.

<sup>11</sup> Chester, *Unreached*,13.

<sup>12</sup> Chester, *Unreached*,13.

bishops. The positive aspect to this is that through such camps men like John Stott, Dick Lucas, David Watson, Nicky Gumbel and our current Archbishop of Canterbury were discipled. The problem was that the church was in effect trusting in “a trickle-down effect” where the gospel would eventually filter down to the masses.

We often associate “trickle-down effect” with economics. This is the concept that if the wealthy are free to get wealthier then there will be a trickle down of that wealth to the middle and working classes so all benefit. This means if you cut taxes at the top, then eventually all will benefit. The approach is particularly associated with Thatcherite and Blairite economics.

The fascinating thing is that when you look at the policies of those associated with trickle down, what they practiced didn't really seem to suggest they really believed in the theory. Now, you may not like their particular political tribes or agree with their policies and you may be suspicious of their motives. However, whether they were right or wrong, they certainly weren't trickle down practitioners.

Margaret Thatcher's government took steps to enable council estate tenants to buy their own homes and the general public to own, and often sell at great profit, shares in large companies. It also cut income tax at the bottom as well as the upper end. In other words, those were attempts at redistribution of wealth directly to people without them having to wait for it to trickle down.

Similarly, Tony Blair, although presenting his government as a friend of business and the rich, oversaw an administration that used tax credits to benefit working families. Thatcher and Blair were followed by the Coalition Government and a massive increase of the income tax threshold. The consequence of this is to reduce the income tax bill of many significantly whilst taking others completely out of the tax system.

Whether these policies were effective is debatable. My point is that their intent displayed an impatience with trickle down. These governments were not waiting for the rich to pass on their wealth and for the benefits of their success to trickle down. These governments were prepared to intervene. The argument was about what type of intervention would be most effective.

What about a trickle down gospel? Well, just as political and economic radicals rejected trickle down economics, we see that visionaries in the church have rarely accepted the mission version. William Carey got this when he called the church to mission and headed off for India. He could not wait for the Gospel to trickle out around the world. He went. Similarly, Hudson Taylor was not content to wait for the Gospel to trickle inland from the coast and ports of China but set up China Inland Mission and headed inland with the good news. Of course, they were following in the footsteps of Paul, who was not content to wait for the Gospel to trickle out from Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus and Rome, but pioneered the way, heading into unreached territories and setting his sights on Spain.

I believe that when it comes to our estates and inner cities, we cannot wait for the trickle down either. If we desire to see churches full of people from different backgrounds, different classes, cultures, ethnicities then we too need to go to the unreached places where the Gospel is not being heard. I have of course focused primarily on class and education here, but what I say also applies to race as well. We have to confess that we have failed to see the Gospel shared with Muslim background immigrants, that primarily our churches are white and whilst there are many believers from Afro-Caribbean and mainland African backgrounds, our churches are often segregated by colour.

## **A personal desire**

Our passions often reflect our own backgrounds and are caught not taught. I grew up in South Bradford, a predominantly working class area. I would not class myself as working class; my dad was degree educated and worked in a professional sector. However, he was the first in his family to go to university and he grew up on a council estate in Derby. My great grandparents were from Italian immigrant stock working in the east end of London: family records show that they signed marriage certificates with a cross, suggesting illiteracy. We went to an inner city church that had started life as a mission hall intended to reach the down and outs in a notoriously rough area. As Chester intimates in his reasons listed above, many of those reached had gone on to sort their lives out, giving up drink and gambling so that they became prosperous. I attend a comprehensive school on the estate rubbing shoulders with council estate lads and Pakistani background Muslims. I grew up loving the city and desiring to see places like Bradford, Leeds, Sheffield and Birmingham reached with the Gospel.

That's what brought us to the West Midlands to Sandwell, a borough on the edge of the Black Country. It's an area that often features on lists of indicators for social and economic deprivation. The church building is located in an increasingly multicultural area. We share our little bit of the High Street with Kurdish barbers, Iranian tailors, African grocery shops and halal butchers. There are also little clusters of hostels for immigrants awaiting Home Office decisions and men fresh out of prison. At the same time, there are little pockets of prosperity with some desirable areas, especially the closer you get to the officially 'posher' Harborne.

Sarah and I bought a house on the local council estate. It is not one of the roughest estates. In fact, a lot of people would consider it a nice area. However, it is still a council estate and that means it carries its own identity. Sadly, one particular part of that identity is the absence of Gospel witness. Churches border the estate and there's one reasonably active charismatic Baptist church on the next little estate along, but this has not translated into gospel contact where we are. We have, during our time here, worked to build up neighbourly friendships as well as some planned door to door work.

It is my personal desire to see lots of thriving gospel communities on estates like ours and in inner city areas, not just in the West Midlands but across the country, and that's what this series of articles is about.

## **Stepping In**

The point is this. Unless people are willing to go to our estates and inner cities to share the good news, then how will people hear the Gospel? If The Church mainly made up of white middle class people, then that means for many (if not most of us) it will, in effect, require a form of cross-cultural mission.

## 2. Going Cross Cultural

If we are going to reach Britain with the Gospel, then we need to be equipped for cross cultural mission. You heard me right. We tend to think about cross cultural mission as being what happens when we send missionaries abroad to Asia and Africa.

If we are going to share the gospel, plant and pastor churches here in our own country, it's a lot more straightforward isn't it? We know our culture. We speak the same language, wear similar clothes, watch the same TV programmes, read the same books etc. Surely, all we have to do is meet people, get to know them and tell them about Jesus.

Yet actually, we already know that this is not the case. Over the past 100 years, our cities have seen significant immigration from all around the world. When I walk down our high street, I meet people from Pakistan, Turkey, Jamaica, Nigeria, Brazil, Poland and so on. I meet first generation immigrants from countries and cultures very different to ours who are having to learn English from scratch as well as people from anglophone cultures. Then there are second and third generation descendants of immigrants who find themselves navigating two cultures: that of their parents and grandparents and that of their friends who they've grown up with.

It's not just about immigration too. Whether we like it or not, we have to consider the question of class. In the coming chapters, I'm going to talk a little about working class culture - or cultures. We don't wear the same clothes, read the same books or even newspapers. There are distinctions between middle class and working class culture. It's not quite the same as sending missionaries abroad: these cultures are not separated by distance and so they interact and inform each other, but the distinctions are there.

The urban missionary needs to be aware that they are entering another culture and they enter it bringing their own culture and assumptions with them. I have identified three different types of pastor/planter/evangelist in urban contexts. Each come with their own challenges:

1. The non-indigenous worker. This person very clearly comes from outside. For example, a middle class pastor who has trained at theological college who arrives on the estate would fall into this category. They will bring with them middle class values and preferences. They risk being seen as an outsider and may experience culture shock and rejection. They may also risk confusing their own cultural values with Biblical values and try to impose them on a community. Equally they may be reluctant to challenge the idolatry within the culture for fear of causing offence.
2. The returning indigenous worker. Some pastors, planters and evangelists are returning to estates and inner city contexts, such as where they may have grown up in the city among working class people. Often the journey to pastoral ministry has included university, a professional job and then theological training. They may assume that because they are originally from an estate/inner-city/working class background that they know the culture and can just fit back in. The danger is that they will still be seen as coming from outside the culture, of having become middle class. They may still be blind to their own cultural assumptions.
3. The indigenous worker. We are praying that God will raise up workers who have grown up on our council estates and in our inner city areas. They are more likely to be accepted as part of the community although commitment to the Gospel may still lead to rejection, especially when it forces ethical choices. Whilst they are not bringing in an alien culture under the

misapprehension that it is Gospel culture, they may not be alert to the idolatry within their own culture, seeing it as “normal.”

So, whether or not you are originally from the estate or you have arrived from a different background, we all find ourselves engaging in cross-cultural mission. How do we go about this? Well, this is where the work of JH Bavinck comes in.

### **JH Bavinck**

JH Bavinck was a Dutch missionary to Indonesia. In 1954, he wrote an important but little known contribution to missiology, translated in 1960 as “An Introduction to the Science of Missions.” It is his thinking in this book that will underpin our approach to urban cross-cultural mission. Our aim in this study is to take his methodology which was originally intended for over-seas mission and use it to think through how we cross cultures with the gospel in our home country context. How does Bavinck help us with urban mission. Before we apply his thoughts, we are going to start by summarising his thinking.

### **The Science of Missions – Five Big Words**

Bavinck’s work can be summed up with five key words: contextualisation, *posessio*, preaching, *elenctics* and *Subversive-Fulfilment*.

#### Contextualisation

Bavinck was a proponent of contextualisation. He argued that the missionary had to carefully apply themselves to each circumstance. We cannot simply copy Paul’s approach at the Areopagus in every situation.<sup>13</sup>

However, he also rejected as simplistic the notion

“that the content of preaching is given in Scripture but that the manner of preaching and the question of the missionary approach is a matter of personal tact and of applying oneself to the given circumstances.”<sup>14</sup>

In other words, he was not a mere pragmatist. The missionary cannot simply determine for themselves how to dress, speak, live based on the situation. Rather, their whole approach both in terms of style and content has to be shaped by Scripture. He says,

“History, which raps our knuckles mercilessly when we make a mistake, has taught us that the missionary approach does indeed have theological aspects.”<sup>15</sup>

He expands on this challenge by explaining that,

“Missionaries may adopt the way of life of a people, speak their language, associate themselves with the religious concepts, utilize saying derived from the religious literature, and from the standpoint of ethnology or psychology, all this may be excellent. And yet it still may be necessary for theology to issue a warning that such efforts which seek to draw us close to a people must proceed with caution lest they sacrifice the purity of the gospel. On the other hand, it is also possible to have the best intentions and to ignore the cultural

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<sup>13</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 80.

<sup>14</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 80.

<sup>15</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 80.

possessions of a people, and to preach the gospel pure and simple, without any application to their specific characteristics.”<sup>16</sup>

Much of the focus of his book on the science of missions is about negotiating that tightrope carefully.

Even the act of contextualisation itself is not motivated by pragmatic considerations alone but was shaped by a theological understanding of what it means to be human and therefore the nature of the people he was seeking to reach. He explains that,

“Abstract, disembodied and history-less sinners do not exist; only very concrete sinners exist, whose sinful life is determined and characterised by all sorts of cultural and historical factors; by poverty, hunger, superstition, traditions, chronic illness, tribal morality, and thousands of other things.”<sup>17</sup>

This has implications for how we present the Gospel. We cannot just stand up and shout into a vacuum hoping for the best. We need to get to know the people we are preaching or speaking to. Sin is universal and similar but it is also contextualised and specific. The way that the consequences of sin are worked out will differ from person to person and neighbourhood to neighbourhood.

As a good reformed thinker, his missiology was also shaped by his understanding of who God was as well and the implications that had for the nature of the Gospel. Bavinck believed in a living, speaking God and so,

“What is preached, the content of preaching, is not a theory, not a philosophical system, but it is God himself. We are not postmen but ambassadors of Christ.”<sup>18</sup>

This gives a high view of preaching and one-to-one witness; it raises our vision beyond the mundane to see that we are not in the business of merely conveying information or even selling a product or idea. Rather,

“Our preaching is the place where the living Christ encounters a lost and confused mankind.”<sup>19</sup>

It was this high view of preaching that caused Bavinck to take contextualisation so seriously.

### Possessio

As Bavinck introduces us to contextualised mission, he introduces the idea of “*possessio*” which sounds like one of those spells you might learn if you headed off to Hogwarts with Harry Potter. However, it’s nothing to do with spells and potions and everything to do with what it means to engage with another culture for the sake of the Gospel.

Bavinck here is thinking about how a fledgling church responds to the culture around it without being conformed to it. Bavinck asks the question this way:

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<sup>16</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 80.

<sup>17</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 81.

<sup>18</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 81-82.

<sup>19</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 82.

“To what extent must a new church which has developed within a specific national community accommodate and adjust itself to the customs, practices and mores current among a people?”<sup>20</sup>

A church may choose to be very different from the culture around it, pursuing Biblical godliness. On one level, that seems the right thing to do as it protects the members from idolatry. However, there are two problems with this. First of all, the church may come to be seen as alien from the community in which it has been planted so that people conclude it is not for them but for outsiders. Secondly, we may think that we are being Biblical and culturally neutral when in fact, we are simply replicating the missionary’s home culture.

“By going too far in accommodating themselves, they are in danger of being swept into heathendom. But, by accommodating themselves too little, they can create an unbridgeable gulf between themselves and their countrymen.”<sup>21</sup>

Borrowing from Thaurén, Bavinck offers 6 levels of accommodation to a surrounding culture.<sup>22</sup>

1. “External” e.g. clothes and social niceties
2. “Linguistic”
3. “Aesthetic” – art, architecture etc e.g. a church’s décor
4. “Social and juridicial” (e.g. marriage customs)
5. “Intellectual”: should we “utilize existing philosophical writings and religious hymns, at least to the degree that they contain something of value”?<sup>23</sup>
6. “Religious and Ethical”

He suggests that churches are helped in the decision because whilst many cultural customs have their roots in pagan beliefs, their usage goes so far back in history that they have in fact lost their original meaning.<sup>24</sup> This means that when choosing whether or not to allow a certain practice, “We can seek to determine the proximity that customs and practices sustain to the essence of paganism.”<sup>25</sup>

However, Bavinck wants to push us further in our thinking. Accommodation involves seeking to compromise with the culture around us, when the Gospel challenges us to do something better. This is where *possessio* comes in. As Bavinck explains,

“We would here note that the term ‘accommodation’ is really not appropriate as a description of what actually ought to take place. It points to an adaption to customs and practices essentially foreign to the gospel. Such an adaption can scarcely lead to anything other than a syncretistic entity, a conglomeration of customs that can never form an essential unity. ‘Accommodation’ connotes something of a denial, of a mutilation. We would therefore prefer to use the term *possessio*, to take in possession.”<sup>26</sup>

This means that we neither see cultural practices as pagan or sinful nor neutral and allowable, but rather as things that we take possession of so that the Gospel can transform them for godly

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<sup>20</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 169.

<sup>21</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 170.

<sup>22</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 171.

<sup>23</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 171.

<sup>24</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 174.

<sup>25</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 174.

<sup>26</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 178.

purposes. Our clothes, food, art etc. can either be used in order to worship and glorify God or to worship idols. Possessio is about re-orientating culture towards the worship of the living God.

“Within the framework of the non-Christian life, customs and practices serve idolatrous tendencies and drive a person away from God. The Christian life takes them in hand and turns them in an entirely different direction; they acquire an entirely different content. Even though in external form there is much that resembles past practices, in reality everything has become new, the old has in essence passed away and the new has come.”<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, this is what is at the heart of subversive fulfilment. We recognise that nothing is really neutral; all of our thoughts, words, actions and choices outside of Christ are idolatrous. For example, my choice of what to wear in the morning is not neutral because my motives are to honour someone else (my football team when I wear their shirt or the pop star whose picture is emblazoned on my top) or myself as I seek to show off my physical body. The Gospel orientates my thinking to what glorifies Christ and what is helpful to others. Paul tells us that we should do everything to God’s glory (1 Corinthians 10: 31) and this love for God and for my neighbour will be seen even in what I eat and who I eat with.

Possessio means that

“Christ takes the life of a people in his hands, he renews and re-establishes the distorted and deteriorated; he fills each thing, each word, and each practice with a new meaning and gives it a new direction.”<sup>28</sup>

### Preaching

The role of the missionary is first and foremost to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Bavinck held to a high view of this proclamation, or preaching in its widest sense as demonstrated by two tremendous quotes. As we saw earlier, Bavinck saw preaching as the offer of God himself so that sinners meet Christ in our preaching.<sup>29</sup>

This means that the person who shares the Gospel has a high responsibility, privilege and duty. We are representing God himself and our aim is to see people encounter God through the Gospel. This means that whether it is in a sermon to a crowd, Bible study with a small group or in 1-1 conversation, something special is happening when the good news is announced. It can never be a mere intellectual exercise. God himself through the Holy Spirit is present, active and at work.

Bavinck suggests that the preacher has four important questions to consider before they begin to speak:

1. Who are we preaching to?<sup>30</sup>
2. Who is the person preaching and what is their relationship to the audience? “A father speaks differently to a child than a child speaks to his friend.”<sup>31</sup>
3. When the encounter takes place: “One speaks differently to a person when he is sick in bed than when he is in the middle of his work.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 179.

<sup>28</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 179.

<sup>29</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 81-82.

<sup>30</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 82.

<sup>31</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 83.

<sup>32</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 85.

4. The place where the gospel encounter happens – home, neutral or hostile territory for the recipient.<sup>33</sup>

Once again, we are being encouraged to contextualise. The Gospel is not communicated **in abstract** but as Bavinck has made clear, in the concrete reality of encounters with human beings who have their own culture, history and experience.

This means that the work of communicating the Gospel doesn't start with a prepared sermon. The missionary, "as soon as he sets foot in the place where he is going to work, he must face the question as to how he should approach the people. How must he win their confidence? How can he understand their inner life?"<sup>34</sup>

This creates challenges. The cross-cultural missionary is stepping into a new and potentially bewildering life. Bavinck describes it here in terms of moving from a Western to Asian context.

"The missionary is himself accustomed to a completely different mode of life. He dresses differently, desires a better house, and sleeps under a mosquito net. He will possibly eat different food and follow certain types of hygiene to escape many illnesses. And if he is married it will soon appear that he sustains a completely different relation to his wife from that of those around him. Moreover, he speaks a different language and disregards all sorts of religious rules considered necessary by the populace. In case of illness he does not call for the witch doctor, he does not work with charms and the like, but he uses medicine which he has brought with him, and which he carefully guards. In short, those to whom he would speak very quickly understand that this missionary lives in a manner which is in every respect different from theirs. He is different from them in everything. Everything that they regard as holy and necessary, he disregards. With amazement they notice that he tramples the old tribal morality under foot. In their eyes this missionary is a terribly dangerous person, a person who disregards the most holy precepts, a thoroughly ill bred man, and above all a thoroughly stupid man."<sup>35</sup>

He goes on:

"The missionary has to learn everything. He has to learn how to speak the language, and in this respect he is more stupid than the smallest child. He must in this strange world also learn what fruits are edible and what are not. He appears as the very picture or epitome of a grown up child, as one who literally knows nothing, yet is so conceited that he does not live according to the rules prescribed by their divine forefathers."<sup>36</sup>

Now, the move from the South East of England to a council estate in a Northern city or a suburb to the inner city may not seem as extreme. You are not going to have to worry about medical risks or mosquitos, you may not be learning a new language, and yet you are learning a new culture. There may be a change in dress code: what you wear may indicate not just whether you belong but where you belong if it indicates gang identity, hierarchy etc. There may be different ways of doing things. To give a small example, we live on a cul-de-sac and there's a kind of known hierarchy as well as little rules about who parks where. That may sound trivial but get it wrong and you've potentially caused significant offence. There are sometimes different expectations. Traditionally West Yorkshire was a place where people would be in and out of each other's houses; in the South East you would not

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<sup>33</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 86.

<sup>34</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 88.

<sup>35</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 88.

<sup>36</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 88.

acknowledge your neighbour in the street; in parts of the Black Country, whilst everyone knows one another well and they talk in the street, you don't tend to just invite people in immediately. Starting off with an invite round for a dinner party might go down like a lead balloon, though a barbecue in the garden might be a good ice breaker. Language may be a bit more subtle, people may speak English (though in multi-ethnic inner city areas this is by no means guaranteed) but local dialectal variations can lead to confusion. In parts of Yorkshire you may be asked to "make us a mash" and you head off to cook some potatoes. You've got it wrong: they were expecting a cup of tea!

So, we may find ourselves in a new culture and at this stage we don't really know people yet. The contacts we have got haven't yet naturally led to gospel conversations. However, there is a sense in which we are already preaching. Bavinck says,

"The manner in which he lives during this entire period is of extreme importance. It is during this period that it is decided whether or not he will be able to break through the wall of misunderstanding and fear and win the confidence of the tribe, or whether he will be regarded as an extremely unwelcome intruder."<sup>37</sup>

How long does that time period last? Well, it may vary from weeks through months to years. When I first arrived in Smethwick, I struck up a friendship with the local Baptist pastor. He told me that he had been in the area about 5 years and it was now that he was beginning to be accepted as someone who was committed to and part of the community. From my own experience, I think he is right. Urban ministry means that we have to be here for the long-haul.

We are beginning to see that whilst Bavinck saw mission as gospel proclamation, he still saw it in broader terms than preaching as we know it in the narrow sense of sermons and speaking. Bavinck points us to Jesus who used both words and deeds (c.f. John 5:36 where it says he comes to do the Father's work).<sup>38</sup> This means that he takes a non-cessationist position, expecting that signs and wonders should take place.<sup>39</sup> However, as well as miracles, he also points us to Jesus' day to day life, building relationships and showing love:

"Think of Jesus' relationship to tax collectors, Samaritans, to an adulterous woman, and to sinners who came to him in full repentance. Innumerable little things characterize the preaching of Jesus and give it a particular form within the hard reality of everyday life."<sup>40</sup>

These little things include

"By his entry into the house of Matthew, by his questioning of the Samaritan women, by the things he did on the Sabbath, indeed by a thousand small and apparently insignificant actions, he broke down the present social and religious order and laid the foundations of a new society in which all would be different."<sup>41</sup>

So, for Bavinck, this word and deed type of preaching includes ways of showing identification with the people you are coming to live amongst. He notes that mission has lots of examples of those who contextualised by dress, food, etc.<sup>42</sup> In urban Britain, we might add learning to love the local football

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<sup>37</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 89.

<sup>38</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 90.

<sup>39</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 92.

<sup>40</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 92.

<sup>41</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 92-93.

<sup>42</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 94.

team. His encouragement of this type of contextualisation to our proclamation, though, is accompanied by a warning:

“Experience has shown us, however, that such identification is not always without danger. The possibility exists that the missionary who casts off his own culture and identifies himself with his hearers will gradually sink spiritually and morally in his new environment and thereby lose the power to fulfil his calling. It is also possible that the people whose customs are being so carefully imitated may view this as a form of deceit and react against it.”<sup>43</sup>

Bavinck’s primary point is that the missionary is no longer their own person:

“the missionary must to a certain degree give up his freedom to be himself and must be bound by his new service, in order to save as many as possible.”<sup>44</sup>

We are reminded at this point of the apostle Paul’s statement that he was willing to be all things to all men, a Jew to the Jew and a Greek to the Greeks so that somehow he might save some.

So much for the broader context to our proclamation: what about the proclamation itself? Bavinck sometimes refers to this as “The Kerygmatic approach.” The whole point of our preaching is that it is bringing good news to sinners.

“Our first consideration, however, is that we understand what man is. In its deepest essence biblical anthropology recognizes that man is a sinner, a rebel, an exile, a displaced person. Within his deepest nature, man is ever concerned with God. God makes him anxious, man seeks to escape God by shoving him aside beyond the horizon of his experience. Man feels assaulted, hunted and oppressed by God, and he rebels. Such is the awful mystery in the life of every man, the drama enacted in his hidden most parts. It is an integral part of his fallen nature, a part of his being a son of Adam. This is what man is, this is his existential basis, the ground on which he stands.”<sup>45</sup>

The challenge of preaching Christ and seeing people convicted of sin is that although people have rejected God and turned their backs on him, they have created religious systems that convince them that they do in fact love and know God. We are preaching to religious people.

“Man lives religiously, he has certain conceptions of God, or of gods, of spirits, of magic and the supernatural, of life after death, and of moral norms. It may be that this religious life is negatively directed, that it discloses itself in objections to religion characterised by convictions against the tenability of religious life. But in any case, consciously or unconsciously, each person has numerous presuppositions about God, the value of a man, and many other things, and he shares these notions with many other people.”<sup>46</sup>

In urban Britain, this will include a range of religious beliefs, including some forms of folk superstition, an inherited cultural/traditional Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism. It will also include a variety of secular, agnostic and atheistic positions that in fact take on a religious dimension. These beliefs provide the outer layer for people’s lives and when we begin to talk about God, Christ and the Gospel create a filter through which our message is heard or rather, obscured.

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<sup>43</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 95.

<sup>44</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 95

<sup>45</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 122.

<sup>46</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 123.

“Man thus erects diverse defences and certainties around the heart of his integral existence as a man and a sinner. Now this peripheral life, this living in a bulwark of defences is clearly determined in its deepest motives by what takes place within its inner depths. For ‘it is out of the heart that everything proceeds,’ says Jesus (cf. Matthew 15:19).<sup>47</sup>

Religion creates a dichotomy between the external appearance and inner reality.

“Within the depths of his being a person may be in flight from God, whilst outwardly he seeks to praise God in his religious life. The God that he thus seeks has then become an unrecognizable frustrating God, a God completely drawn into the earthly sphere, who is factually identical with nature.”<sup>48</sup>

Ironically, we try to find peace by avoiding God and religion can be the way to do this.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the outer, protective layer of religiosity. Bavinck retains great confidence in the power of the Gospel and the ability of the Holy Spirit to cut through those layers, through the preaching of God’s Word.

“No further argument is needed to show that the gospel approach would reach man in his very depths, where all protective cloaks have been removed, and where he knows himself to be face to face with his God. Such is also the meaning of Jesus when he refers to the great work the Holy Spirit will do in the world, ‘and when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgement’ (John 16:8).”<sup>50</sup>

However, the reality of those outer layers throws up another challenge for us. Is it better to dive straight in with a direct attack on sin and call to salvation to progress more gradually with an indirect approach that begins to engage with the outer layers and to dismantle arguments, conceptions and deeply held beliefs through apologetics and teaching.<sup>51</sup> Bavinck sees both methods as having both something to offer and disadvantages. It is important to look at each context in turn and seek guidance for the right way ahead.<sup>52</sup> Scripture shows both methods being employed. When Nathan rebukes David, he goes in direct, as when Paul calls out to the Philippian jailer. However, “on the Areopagus, he (Paul) took the cultural situation of his audience very seriously and dealt with their presuppositions.”<sup>53</sup>

If proclamation is a one to one encounter, then,

“In the first place we must try to see the person with whom we are dealing. This means that we must seek to see through a person’s name, position, reasons and arguments, and try to reach his real-life problems.”<sup>54</sup>

It is vital that our encounters are characterised by love.<sup>55</sup> This is both because we love the person and see their need but also because we humbly recognise our own sin and dependency on grace.

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<sup>47</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 123.

<sup>48</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 123.

<sup>49</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 123.

<sup>50</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 124.

<sup>51</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 124-125.

<sup>52</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 125.

<sup>53</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 125.

<sup>54</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 125.

<sup>55</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 126.

“Meeting-in-love includes the recognition of myself in the other person, a sympathetic feeling of his guilt and sincere desire in Christ to do with this man what Christ has done with me.”<sup>56</sup>

Gospel proclamation will lead to a confrontation between the preacher and hearer’s beliefs. This confrontation includes a searching out for ‘points of contact’ so that we begin where they are.

“A point of contact is sought in the life and thought of the people. An effort is made to begin where they are, with their own views of salvation and the divine. In the course of the discussion, efforts are then made to penetrate to the heart of their religious beliefs and practices in contrast to the gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>57</sup>

This means that,

“One begins with that is already known and clearly understood by the audience.”<sup>58</sup> This means “the message of Christ is not set in a vacuum.”<sup>59</sup>

If we take an indirect, apologetic approach, then we will engage with the things that the hearer believes.

“The old belief is examined, its depth is measured and its basic motives laid bare. And after a certain point, the mighty word of Christ is spoken; God’s judgement is then pronounced and the finely spun webs of human thought are brushed aside. The gap between the word of God and the speculation of man becomes visible. But God’s call to repentance can now acquire a concrete and precisely understood meaning.”<sup>60</sup>

Bavinck observes that this forces us to stop, ask questions and learn from those we are engaging with. We get them to tell us what they believe and why. He sees a secondary benefit to this in cross-cultural mission because seeking to understand and engage with their beliefs helps in contexts where westerners are often seen as proud and arrogant.<sup>61</sup> We might add that this applies in our context too where middle class, white believers may also be seen as proud and arrogant.

### Elenctics

The term ‘elenctics’ comes from the Greek word *elenchos* which was originally to do with exposing someone’s shame. In the New Testament, it is all to do with the work (particularly of the Holy Spirit) of convicting of sin and guilt (See especially John 16:8).<sup>62</sup>

Bavinck uses the word to mean “the conviction and unmasking of sin, and... the call to responsibility.”<sup>63</sup> He explains that,

“When we speak of elenctics we do well to understand it in the sense that it has in John 16:8. The Holy Spirit is actually the only conceivable subject of this verb, for the conviction of

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<sup>56</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 127.

<sup>57</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 131.

<sup>58</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 132.

<sup>59</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 133.

<sup>60</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 133.

<sup>61</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 133.

<sup>62</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 221.

<sup>63</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 226.

sin exceeds all human ability. Only the Holy Spirit can do this although he can and will use us as instruments in his hand.”<sup>64</sup>

This means that whilst we are talking about the Holy Spirit’s work, it is through his indwelling of believers and equipping them with gospel proclamation gifts that he does his work. This means that, for Bavinck, the skill of bringing people to that point where they are convicted of their sin and idolatry is a vital part of the science of missions.

For him, it is not primarily about using reason and philosophical arguments to win the point, although reason is frequently used in the apologetic arguments found in Scripture. For example, consider the sarcasm of Isaiah 44: false religion calls people to make idols from trees with half the tree being used to carve the image and the other half turned into firewood. Isaiah uses reason to show the folly of false religion.

“Paganism is indeed foolishness, and it can be profitable to point this out. But the spear point of the prophetic elenctic argument is thrust in another direction: idolatry is despicable, a terrible rebellion against the only true God; it is satanic pride, self-idolatry, self-deification an attempt to pull God down to the world, and to make God a servant of one’s self.”<sup>65</sup>

Reason as in the use of logic is here distinguished from rationalism, the trust in reason alone.<sup>66</sup> *Note that Bavinck is not merely saying that rationalism/philosophy isn’t a tool available to us but that it isn’t an effective tool. In fact it will do more harm than good because it will fail to tell the hearer things he needs to know, for example “...we will have to tell him directly of Satan”<sup>67</sup> and because if the aim is an encounter with the living, loving, covenant God, then philosophy lands us in the wrong place. It leads to “an abstract concept of God” which creates a vacuum<sup>68</sup> “The God which he now knows is an idea, it is not a living God, not a redeemer.”<sup>69</sup>*

But if reason is not our primary tool for doing elenctics, then how are we to see people who don’t know Christ convicted of sin?<sup>70</sup> Bavinck answers,

“It must first be noted that each person, no matter how deeply fallen and how far departed, still is within the reach of God’s common grace.”<sup>71</sup>

Once again, we return to the conflict at the heart of every person, that we are both aware of God even as we run away from him (c.f. Romans 1:19). Bavinck explains that,

“There is deep in the heart of man, even among those who live and believe in non-Christian religions, a very vague awareness that man plays a game with God and that man is secretly busy escaping from him. I cannot explain this phenomenon in any other way except that God’s revelation reaches every man.”<sup>72</sup>

However, we need to be careful in our thinking. Some theologians and missiologists have taken this point to suggest that all religions in some way contain aspects of God’s revealed truth. Bavinck says

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<sup>64</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 222.

<sup>65</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 226.

<sup>66</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 226.

<sup>67</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 230-231.

<sup>68</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 230.

<sup>69</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 230.

<sup>70</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 227.

<sup>71</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 227.

<sup>72</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 228.

that, “we must be very cautious if we would speak about moments of truth in non-Christian religions.”<sup>73</sup> He goes on to explain,

“That they believe in a God is an element of truth, but what they say and think of him is entirely different from what God has revealed of himself in his word. The words found in the sacred books of other religions which are nearly identical with the words of the Bible ought also not to lead us into error. Within their entire context, they certainly have a different meaning.”<sup>74</sup>

Whilst there is a strong argument for what some have termed “*priscae theologia*” or “original revelation”, the idea that Adam and Noah passed something of their knowledge of God down to their descendants, if they inherited some special revelation then it has been so fragmented and distorted by sin as to not be able to offer us useful revelation of God and his ways. Words and concepts familiar to Christians may appear in other religions but,

“Concepts such a sin, grace, redemption, prayer, sacrifice, which we encounter in other religions, all have a different content than in the Bible.”<sup>75</sup>

What that shared language gives is shared questions about God, Creation, Humanity and New Creation. In other words, we start to find points of contact. Additional points of contact are found as we see something of ourselves in the unbeliever and recognise our own sin.

“The more you learn to know heathendom in its deepest motives (which lie hidden beneath its foolish and childish reasonings), the more you recognize yourself therein; you see that you yourself are repeatedly busy, in the same way, trying to flee from God and to push him aside, although you do so in a much more refined and sophisticated manner.”<sup>76</sup>

This also means that personal testimony of God’s grace at work in your own life has a powerful part to play in elenctics.

“Your own life, in which God’s grace has performed and patiently continues to perform a wonderful work against the unruliness of your own heart, itself constitutes a basis for your elenctic efforts.”<sup>77</sup>

So, we go into the fray, a little like David, the shepherd boy not heavily armoured with intellectual tools but stripped and with only a slingshot in our hands.

“You do not then need to begin with endless rational argumentation in order to break the webs of his thoughts. In the grace of Jesus Christ you possess a more powerful means. Paul writes, ‘And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstrations of the Spirit and of power.’ (1 Corinthians 2:4).”<sup>78</sup>

It is the preacher and preaching that will be used by the Holy Spirit to convict.

Contextualisation is in fact a thread that runs through all of the concepts: our lives, preaching and gospel confrontation can never happen in abstract.

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<sup>73</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 228.

<sup>74</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 228.

<sup>75</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 228.

<sup>76</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 230.

<sup>77</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 230

<sup>78</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 230.

“Elenctics ... can actually be exercised only in living contact with the adherents of other religions. Each generalization, every systematization, carries within itself the danger that one will do injustice to the living person. In practice I am never concerned with **Buddhism**, but with a living person and his Buddhism, I am never in contact with Islam but with a Moslem and his Mohammedanism.”<sup>79</sup>

This means that whilst the type of exercise we are undertaking here has its place, there’s a time for reading, thinking and writing, you cannot beat getting to know actual people:

“If I seek to take a man by storm with general rules and norms derived from books, it is possible that I may miss the mark, and what I say may go over his head, because what he himself finds in his own religion, and the way in which he lives it, is something entirely different from what I had originally thought.”<sup>80</sup>

We cannot simply assume that a Muslim adheres to a systematic form of his religion as outlined in some textbook on Islam. We may find that he has inconsistent beliefs, maybe even some idiosyncratic ideas of his own too and there may be a gap between his head knowledge of his religion and his practice of it. This is of course the same with Christianity. Likewise, we will discover that there is a massive difference between reading a book about the working classes with all its generalisations and talking to real working class people.

Once again, this pushes us towards humility as we must start as learners not teachers, observing, asking questions, getting to know people.

“Elenctics must first of all begin with the precise and calm knowledge of the nature of the religion with which it is concerned. It must do this honestly and calmly; that is to say, it must not be too quick to interrupt, it must let this religion state its case. What does it actually think about God? How does it think of the relation between God and the World? What does it say of man, of his misery and of his salvation? How are all such matters confessed theoretically but, not only that, how are they lived practically? What does this religion mean to its followers; how does it conduct their life, how does it give direction, protection, safety, hope?”<sup>81</sup>

### Subversive Fulfilment

You won’t find this actual phrase in Bavinck, in fact we owe it to another Dutch Reformed Missiologist, Hendrik Kraemer. However, the phrase effectively sums up Bavinck’s methodology.

Subversive Fulfilment is based on the premise that each person has questions, dreams, aspirations, longings, needs etc. The religious dimension to our lives which Bavinck describes means that we are aware that there is more to life than this. Those distorted fragments of truth we have inherited from Adam bury down into our lives, scratching away and provoking discontent. The Fulfilment part of the phrase means that only Christ can fulfil our deepest needs and longings. However, it is not simply that Christ fulfils the longings: truth has been fragmented and distorted and even our deep desires are idolatrous. This is where the “subverted” part of the phrase comes in. It means that our longings which are orientated towards ourselves and our idols as expressions of pride and selfishness have to be turned around and orientated to the Christ through the Gospel. It means that those broken,

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<sup>79</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 240.

<sup>80</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 240 – 241.

<sup>81</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 241-242.

distorted fragments of truth have to be repaired and re-ordered so that they fit together, find their place and make sense in God's true revelation.

We are going to be learning how to do this in an urban context. To help us do so, we also have a process to work through.

### **The 4 Steps**

Dan Strange of Oak Hill Theological College has suggested a four-step process for engaging with people in their cultural context for the Gospel. In "Unreached," Tim Chester lists them as "Enter, explore, engage, evangelise."<sup>82</sup>

However, I prefer the four headings Dan first used when he introduced this methodology to his students: Step In, Search Out, Show Up and Show Off.

Step In is a call to leave our own world, our own culture, behind, to step out of our comfort zones and into a new world. Evangelism cannot be done at a distance. If we are ambassadors for Christ, then we are not called to engage in megaphone diplomacy. Rather, we are to get close and get to know people, making our lives among them.

Search Out means that we will get to know the culture in which we live. As we have seen from Bavinck, this will mean taking time to observe and ask questions. We will discover their beliefs, felt needs, longings and their questions. We will be looking for those points of contact.

Show Up is where we start to confront the idolatry which is at the root of their beliefs and practices. This is where we begin to subvert the worldview in which we find ourselves. We will show how their presuppositions are faulty and so can never offer fulfilment and never answer their deepest questions, needs and longings.

Show Off means that we point them to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in all its glory and show how he is the fulfilment that they were always longing and hoping for.

We will be using these four steps to help us navigate urban mission.

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<sup>82</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 100.

### 3 An introduction to idolatry

An important part of the Subversive Fulfilment approach is an understanding of idolatry. The subversive part of the term comes from the fact that even our dreams and desires are idolatrous. We cannot simply offer the possibility to people that their life will find fulfilment in Christ: we must start by showing them that in their dreams and desires, their lives are orientated the wrong way, away from the true and living God and towards false gods. Mission must involve a call to repentance, a call to turn from false gods and idolatrous worship to wholehearted worship and devotion to the true and living God.

#### **Idolatry is a heart issue**

In Deuteronomy 6, we are introduced to the first and greatest commandment on which the whole of the Law hangs:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”<sup>83</sup>

This means we are to love him with our whole being, with all that we are. This is an exclusive form of love. What does this love look like? Well, the first two of the Ten Commandments flesh this out by telling us,

“You shall have no other gods before<sup>l</sup> me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”<sup>84</sup>

It is helpful then to understand the fall of Genesis 3 in terms of idolatry. In Genesis 1-2, we discover that God makes a good world; he makes humans to live in the world and to look after the world for him. He provides for them: food, help, the work itself and boundaries/rules enabling them to know how to live in his world under his rule and blessing. The provision of rules and boundaries is exemplified in the command to not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

#### **Idolatry starts with a distorted caricature of the true God**

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve are tempted by the serpent. The nature of the temptation is an attack on God’s goodness and greatness. His goodness is attacked as the truthfulness and motives for his commands are undermined. Blocher comments,

“The snake’s attack on the truth of God’s word is launched in an indirect manner, by imputing hidden motives that God’s revelation passes over in silence, by subjecting the terms of the covenant to ‘the hermeneutic of suspicion’. Even when he is so bold as to contradict the terms of God’s words, ‘DYING you shall not die’ (v4), there is still ambiguity. The unusual placing of the negative leaves open the possibility of understanding it as: ‘It is not proper death that you shall undergo’; in other words, dare to experience the trivial death-like change that will bring you the experience of full humanity.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

<sup>84</sup> Deuteronomy 5:8-10 (ESV).

<sup>85</sup> Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 139.

Similarly, God's sovereignty is undermined as his ability to communicate clearly is questioned when he says, "Did God really say...?" and as it is implied that he has something to fear from human rivalry. The idea that we humans could seriously rival him for his power and his glory is treated as reasonable instead of ridiculous.

Therefore, sin starts when we start to believe lies about God. This reflects the third commandment's instruction not to take God's name in vain.<sup>86</sup> It is worth spelling out exactly the nature of the god imagined in the conversation between Eve and the Serpent in Genesis 3:1-7.

- This is a god who cannot communicate clearly to us. We cannot be sure about his revelation.
- This is a god whose word cannot be relied upon – he does not speak truthfully; what he says will not come true.
- This is a god whose motives cannot be trusted – he is not acting for our good but to restrict us.
- This is a god whose sovereignty cannot be depended upon. God is presented as acting out of fear.

Now, it is irrational for Adam and Eve to believe these things about the living God. It is not as though they have only known about God at a distance; they have personally encountered him as he has walked and talked with them in the garden. Yet, sin's idolatry starts with our decision to believe lies about God.

Romans 1:16-32 shows how humanity chooses to suppress the truth about God (v18) and exchange it for a lie (v25.) The truth is that God has clearly revealed who he is to us. We have actively chosen to disbelieve the truth and instead believe lies about him. Dan Strange, commenting on Romans 1, notes first of all that revelation is unavoidably clear. It is not something we had to tease out and discover for ourselves, it "does not simply slide off man ineffectually like a raindrop glides off a waxy tree leaf."<sup>87</sup> Secondly, he observes that idolatry is a hostile and violent act as we wilfully suppress the truth about God.<sup>88</sup> Strange likens the language of suppression in Romans 1:18 to

"a child playing with an inflatable ball in the water. She tried to hold the ball under the water with all her might and thinks she has succeeded, but the ball always pops up to the surface again for the child to try again and so on."<sup>89</sup>

This is important because the god we reject is in fact a false god and not the true and living God. We have already created an idol by accepting a distorted caricature of YHWH.

Sin and idolatry are therefore, first and foremost, an offense to God's honour. Calvin puts it like this:

"At the same time, it is to be observed, that the first man revolted against the authority of God, not only in allowing himself to be ensnared by the wiles of the devil, but also by despising the truth and turning aside to lies. Assuredly when the word of God is despised, all reverence for him is gone."<sup>90</sup>

This gives us some sense of what it means to take God's name in vain. It is not simply using "God" and "Jesus" as swear words. God's name represents his character including his power, love and

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<sup>86</sup> Deuteronomy 5:11.

<sup>87</sup> Strange, "Perilous Exchange," 113.

<sup>88</sup> Strange, "Perilous Exchange," 113.

<sup>89</sup> Strange, "Perilous Exchange," 113.

<sup>90</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.4. (Beveridge 1:213).

covenant faithfulness. When we deny these things, we empty God's name of its meaning. God is replaced with a powerless idol.

This also means that people can on one level be religiously orthodox in that the claim to worship the one true God. They don't worship physical idols, they belong to churches, they sing Christian hymns and offer "Christian prayers" that conform to orthodox liturgy. However, if the image of God they have in their heart is the one described above, then they are worshipping an idol.

This is relevant to our urban subversive fulfilment task for three reasons. First of all, because I am going to keep insisting that the work must start with our own hearts. Jesus tells us to remove the logs from our own eyes before tackling the splinters in others. Subversive Fulfilment is not just a missiological or apologetic device but also a means to self-evangelism. We start by searching out our own hearts and preaching the Gospel to ourselves. Still more accurately, it means allowing God's Holy Spirit through Scripture to search out our own hearts and to disagree with us. Do I have a faulty understanding of God? Is my own heart idolatrous?

Secondly, because a lot of Gospel work in urban communities is not about starting from scratch. Churches already exist on estates and in inner city communities. As well as church planting, there are great opportunities for mission through church revitalisation. Some of us will end up pastoring existing churches that have become introverted and fossilized. Revitalisation must start with a challenge: "has the church become idolatrous even whilst appearing orthodox? Has it lost sight of God's greatness and goodness, his sovereign power, his faithful love and his amazing outpoured grace?"

Thirdly, we will be meeting people who have some form of Christian heritage. This will include white working class people who attended a church school, whose grandparents went to church and whose parents were sent to Sunday School. There will be a legacy here and we may well find some points of contact as they remember prayers, Bible verses and hymns. But the picture they have of the God they heard about may be false. It will also include immigrants from cultures where there is at least some form of Christian heritage including South American cultures with Catholicism and Pentecostalism and African cultures also with a mix of Christian heritages. Again, we will meet people who at least on some level seek to know and worship the God of the Bible but may have a distorted understanding of who he is.

### **Idolatry means that we worship the Creature instead of the Creator**

Romans 1:22 goes on to tell us that we have exchanged God's glory for the worship of creatures. Of course, once our image of the true God is a distorted, idolatrous caricature, then it is much easier to give up this god for idols than it is to give up the real thing.

In Genesis 2-3, the irony is that humans, who were made to look after creation and enjoy its benefits, make idols out of the serpent who they choose to listen to instead of God and the tree which they look to in order to meet their felt needs and desires instead of trusting God to provide them with what they need.

### **Idolatry sees us attempt to pursue idolatrous desires through false means**

This takes us to the third point about idolatry. Our desires become idolatrous. In Romans 1, this is exemplified by the handing over of humanity to unnatural sexual desire. In Genesis 3, it is seen in the way that knowledge is prioritised over everything else God provides and everything it means to be made in God's image. The promise the serpent makes is that Adam and Eve will be god-like. The irony is that they are already made in God's image, but they want a perverted form of that *Imago*

*Dei*. They don't just want to be image bearers: they want shared status, or even to usurp God's position. This, of course, offers a sharp contrast with Christ, who was in very nature God but did not see equality with God as something to be held onto.<sup>91</sup> Calvin registers this as ingratitude:<sup>92</sup>

"It was surely monstrous impiety that a son of earth should deem it little to have been made in the likeness, unless he were also made equal to God."<sup>93</sup>

Idoltrous desires are costly. In their pursuit of knowledge, Adam and Eve lose something which comes with the *Imago Dei* – they lose life. God has warned them that they if they ate the fruit then they would die. Death is seen in their exile from God's presence, the reality of coming physical death and eternity in hell. Not only that, but they lose the very thing they are seeking after. They become fools and their minds are darkened.<sup>94</sup>

The final thing to say about sin and idolatry is that the goal is to make ourselves into God. Idol worship is self-worship. It is a pride thing. Adam and Eve are tempted by the possibility of becoming like God. The problem is that we think that we can use creation for our own ends; we believe that our idols serve us when in fact we are enslaved to them. Romans 1:21 says that humans thought they were becoming wise when in fact they were becoming fools. Adam and Eve believe they are escaping tyranny and discovering freedom, but have, in fact, become enslaved to creation. This is shown biblically in the judgement pronounced in Genesis 3:16-20. Childbirth will come with pain and harvest will require sweat and toil in the face of thorns and thistles. In Romans 1:24-32, we are told that humanity has been handed over to "impurity", "dishonourable passions" and "debased minds."

Later on, we will look at examples of idolatry and idoltrous desires within the communities we are seeking to reach, but once again we want to start by looking at ourselves and how even as we are called to mission in urban communities, we risk being distracted by the idolatry of our own dreams, passions and priorities. These can include the desire

- For success as we seek to build a reputation and a name for ourselves.
- To find meaning and identity as the saviours of people we are coming to serve.
- To impose our own order and control onto other people, places and events. This, for example, may result in the cloning of ministry methods and structures.

### **Idolatry seeks to enjoy the goodness of God's provision in isolation from God**

The final thing to say about idolatry is that because we believe lies about God, we seek to place God at a distance and enjoy his provision without him. One of the startling things about Genesis 3:1-7 is that, for the first time in the narrative, we have extended text where God does not speak or act. Now, the reality is that God is always speaking, always active and always near; he hasn't in fact abandoned Adam and Eve. Yet they and the serpent act as though God is absent.

Religion has a habit of putting God at a distance so that he becomes the "unknown god" of Acts 17:23. We learn to believe the lies that

- God is remote, unapproachable and uninterested in us.
- That God holds on to all the good things that we need and deserve.

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<sup>91</sup> Philippians 2:6.

<sup>92</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.4. (Beveridge 1:213).

<sup>93</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.4. (Beveridge 1:213).

<sup>94</sup> Romans 1:21.

- That our priority and purpose is to somehow reach up to God so that we can claim those good things for ourselves to enjoy them.

This, in effect, becomes a snatch and grab mission. We devise means in order to try and reach up to God, take what we are owed and then return to our own lives so we can enjoy them. This is, in fact, the root presupposition of Gnosticism. Gnosticism teaches that God is an unknowable spirit, that matter is an unpleasant accident and that God cannot come into contact with it. We somehow need to escape from matter to enjoy spirit life.

This thinking is seen in Roman Catholicism where somehow through penance and prayers to saints we hope to enjoy grace and it is seen especially in the prosperity gospel where we hope by using the right words, and knowing the right preachers, to have access to the health and wealth that is ours by right. Prosperity teaching suggests that if we use the right words and exercise enough faith then somehow this unlocks God's treasure stores so that he is forced to comply with our demands.

We must be wary because even our preaching of the Gospel can give the impression that we offer something similar. If people say the right prayer and come to the right churches, then God will be compelled to forgive them and give them the free gift of eternal life which they can then enjoy without an ongoing obedient relationship to him.

### **Conclusion**

In Acts 17, we see Paul taking time to explore the city of Athens. He is distraught at the idolatry of the city. Mission means stepping into a world of idols. Our response as we step in and search out should be distress too.

However, mission also means that we have to step into our own idolatrous world too and search out the false beliefs that distort our understanding of God and distract us from his mission.