"Fools for Christ, Foolmakers for Christ"—The recovery of persuasive Christian advocacy

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by OS GUINNESS

My genuine pleasure and sense of privilege at being invited to give this second C. S. Lewis Memorial Lecture is tempered by one main thing: unlike your distinguished lecturer last year, I did not have the privilege of knowing C. S. Lewis personally. Having said that, I did come to faith through reading Lewis's *Mere Christianity* as a sixth former and I am certain that the topic we are tackling tonight is one which would be very close to his heart as an apologist. Besides, the breakthrough in my own understanding in this area actually came from a remark of his that I heard quoted, although I have never been able to trace its source. The remark had the effect of breaking a log jam in my thinking. The experience of being forced to laugh at oneself, he is said to have remarked, is the closest that human beings ever come, on a natural plane, to the experience of repentance.

Let me begin at two places a long way from C. S. Lewis or traditional apologetics. One of the most widely read Christian books today—thanks to the *Readers' Digest*—was *Peace Child*. Don and Carol Richardson from Australia went as missionaries to West Irianjiah where they discovered the Sawis, a tribe whose highest value was treachery. The Sawis even had a custom which they called "fattening for friendship" whereby they encouraged people to think that they really trusted them, invited them for dinner, killed them and ate them. Naturally, this created problems for the Richardsons when they attempted to share the Gospel, problems that were theoretical as well as practical. They discovered, for example, that when they told the story of the last week of Christ's life, the whole tribe got immensely enthusiastic and broke into applause—but for Judas, not Jesus. Jesus was the sucker, Judas the hero. How on earth were they to make sense of the Gospel in such a topsy-turvy situation?

We have probably all heard stories like that, but many people tend to think that such communication puzzles are limited to the world of the "mission field". Far from it. I suggest to you that many of our acquaintances in the modern world are just as difficult to reach as that. Secularism has made them tone deaf to the supernatural just as relativism has rendered them colour blind to issues of truth and to the vital differences between the various religious faiths. Our problem in the West is much the same as that facing the Richardsons among a Stone Age people. How do we make convincing sense of the Gospel to people apparently so closed?

1

My other starting point might appear a long way from anything Christian at all. As well as being a great American novelist, Norman Mailer is well known for his belligerent chauvinism and he is often opposed by feminists wherever he goes. In the 1970s when invited to speak at Florida State University, he was warned that a huge phalanx of feminists had come out to jeer him. Mailer therefore stepped forward to the microphone and said, "All right, you women", (or rather more colourful words to that effect!) "Boo now". Evidently the feminists obliged and for several minutes there was a sustained barrage of booing, hissing and jeering. Inevitably, however, it subsided after a time and when quiet fell he stepped back to the mike and said, "Didn't I tell you, you obedient little women?" From then onwards they listened in a subdued silence.

Mailer is hardly a pattern for Christian virtue, but I suggest to you that this style of communication was far closer to certain biblical styles than most of ours is. Take the example of Micaiah in 1 Kings 22. Jehosaphat and Ahab, you remember, were going out to battle and all the prophets to a man had said, "Attack and win". In good modern style the prophets had even used visual aids to make their point. Jehoshaphat was not satisfied and asked if there was no other prophet. "Yes", said Ahab, "There is one and he always prophesises evil about me". Micaiah is therefore negatively stereotyped, but they fetch him and the Chamberlain orders him to prophesy victory as all the others had.

What would you have done if you were in Micaiah's shoes? He has been stereotyped, he is under strict orders and he is hopelessly in a minority. If you read the text carefully you will see that he comes on and says exactly the same as the other prophets had. But he does so sufficiently tongue in cheek for Ahab (no less) to burst out, "I adjure you in the name of the Lord to tell us the truth". Micaiah obliges. He drops the foolery and says, "You'll lose and you'll die. I saw all Israel scattered like sheep on the hillside without a shepherd". Ahab, in others words, had walked onto Micaiah's left hook just as surely as the feminists did to Norman Mailer's.

Now if you study the varieties of creative communication in the Scriptures, from the humblest pun up through parables and drama to what is surely the greatest *double entendre* of all time—the Incarnation—they mostly pivot on the same things: a discrepancy between an expectation which is built up in one direction and an effect which is suddenly brought about in another. By effecting a switch or sudden shift in thinking, as with a lunchline, such communication succeeds by reversing the original meaning and revealing a new one. It becomes a form of subversion through surprise.

A Central Problem Today

Let us consider one of the chief practical problems we face in Christian communication today—the loss of creative persuasion. This problem could be unwrapped either theoretically, which I shall leave because of lack of space, or practically. The latter is what matters ultimately, of course, in

day-to-day Christian living.

Is it an overstatement to say that ninety-nine per cent of our Christian communication today is directed at less than one per cent of our contemporaries—those people who are open, interested or needy enough to be ready for what we say? If you examine Christian communication from the simplest tract to the most sophisticated apologetic tome, most examples depend on a substantial amount of interest, need or openness. Yet you do not have to think long to realise that most people in the British Isles are not open, not interested and not particularly aware of need at any particular moment. This means simply that the greater part of our apologetics, and much of our evangelism too, is directed at the tiny minority of people and has little or nothing to say to the majority.

A number of simple examples will make the point plain. In the new American electronic evangelism, for example, appeals for money are made repeatedly with the incentive of reaching 'X' number of unreached people for Christ. Doubtless most evangelists who make such appeals are totally sincere. But studies show that very few genuine outsiders are actually reached and comparatively few genuinely unchurched are actually won to Christ. Electronic evangelism, in short, commonly lacks the genuinely creative persuasion to appeal to and win people who are truly outside.

Another example comes from Australia, where Christians have had to wrestle with the uncomfortable fact, indicated by research, that there is a high correlation between the cultures in which people are born and the churches in which they are born again. For all the talk of the Gospel being "the power of God", comparatively few people are born again outside the broad circles in which they were born in the first place. In short, Christian witness only rarely breaks out of the sub-cultures or groupings in which people are already.

Coming closer to home geographically and methodologically, I remember an evening at the Swiss L'Abri listening to a Christian student from Cambridge witnessing to an existentialist from Paris. The argument between them raged backwards and forwards for several hours, mainly centering on the Resurrection. Clearly the Frenchman was highly intrigued just as the Cambridge student was well informed. The latter had obviously read *Who moved the stone?* and he argued cogently for the facts of the resurrection. Toward midnight the Frenchman finally said, "Yes, I believe that Jesus Christ did rise from the dead". Instantly the Cambridge student sat back in his seat with a look of jubilation as if he had been a Russian Grand Master who had just said "Checkmate". The Frenchman, however, looked at him in astonishment and said, "But so what?" Within the framework of his existentialist universe there could be six resurrections a day before breakfast, but none would lead to the conclusion that Jesus Christ was Lord and God.

Such examples could be multiplied, but the point is surely clear. Evangelism and apologetics are both comparatively straightforward when people are sufficiently open, interested or needy, yet most of our generation

for most of the time are not. Needless to say, such a comment implies no dismissal of the apologetics and evangelism that meets those people who are open, interested or needy. But we must surely ask how we are to reach the majority, especially when we remember that in the last eighty years the number of secular people has grown from 0.2 per cent of the world's population to 21.3 per cent. It has grown, in other words, from one-fifth of one per cent to one-fifth of the entire world.

What this means is that the number of people who are either "colour blind" or "tone deaf" is increasing all the time and such people, of course, are not statistics. They are members of our own families, our own colleagues, our own neighbours and friends and so on. If the effectiveness of evangelism and apologetics were judged in the light of considerations like these, it would be seen that the lack of creative persuasion is a central problem in Christian communication today.

A Precedent from Christian History

Christian history provides a rich treasury of precedents and patterns to help us in our present dilemma. But out of the extraordinary range of people and styles from which we may learn, there is one which I would suggest is the most illuminating and helpful for our time: Erasmus' sixteenth century understanding of the biblical notion of fools and fool-making. No other notion today, I would argue, is at once more biblical, practical and timely.

To understand this notion in its setting, we need to appreciate, in the first place, the double challenge faced by Christians at the time of the Renaissance. On one hand, the Renaissance world was extremely relativistic. The North was clashing with the South, tradition with the new ideas, and soon Protestants were to be clashing with the Catholics. Thus many of the traditionally accepted features of the medieval world were in disarray, while fixed authorities were topsy-turvy. As Shakespeare put it in *King Lear*, "Truth and goodness to the vile seemed vile". It was a world that was as upside-down and inside-out, chaotic and relativistic as the world of the Sawis was in relation to the values of the Gospel. In such a time how were the Christians to make convincing sense of the Gospel?

Only a generation or two earlier, figures such as the pilgrim, the knight and the monk could speak simply and straightforwardly and count on being understood. But such was the relativism in the Renaissance, such was the disarray of the old verities and authorities, that this was no longer possible. How then were Christians to speak faithfully and yet freshly and forcefully at once?

On the other hand, the Renaissance Church was deeply and notoriously worldly. Thomas Linacre, for example, was Henry VIII's physician at the time of the Reformation and he was handed a copy of the Gospels towards the end of his life when he joined the church. Having read them for the first time, he made the famous remark, "Either these are not the Gospels or we are not Christians". Such a remark vividly reveals the age's striking disparity

4

between the standards of the Gospel and the practice of Christians. Again, it raised the problem that, if the church was so worldly, how could Christians make sense of the Gospel in a way which would be clear enough to convince those outside who saw the Church? The obvious parallels with the relativism of the twentieth century and the worldliness of the contemporary Church needs no underscoring.

In addition, to appreciate the notion of fool-making in its setting we need to understand the double context from which it sprang. On the one hand the notion grows out of a Christian understanding of the social context in which humans live. When Genesis 2 describes Adam's ability to name the animals, it demonstrates that the capacity to identify is part of our God-given gift as human beings. If there had been no Fall, human beings would have named and identified correctly, appropriately and justly. After the Fall, however, the capacity is double-edged. We can identify and we can name, but we can also label and stereotype. Naming is now relative and it depends on who says so and why.

This theological interpretation lies behind the purely sociological observation that all human societies have three main types of social categories. The first, that of heroes, is positive, while the other two, villains and fools, are negative. Of course, every culture, every society, every nation has a different cast of heroes, villains and fools and it is important to ask: who says so? And by what authority? But from a Christian perspective, while many categories of "foolishness" are grounded only in differences of culture and grouping, the deepest reason for the relativity of folly is not society, but sin. On the other hand, the notion of foolmaking can only be understood against the historical context in which the Renaissance Christians found themselves. Not that the history of folly made it an obvious choice for Christians. On the contrary, it was a surprising, even shocking, choice as a glance at the three main strands of the tradition of folly reveals.

First, there was the tradition of the "common fool". Our English word "fool" comes from the Latin word for "bellows" and was used to refer to a person whose head was considered as empty as a pair of bellows. There were, needless to say, no mental hospitals or asylums in Europe at that time, so "fools" were free-roaming, commonly understood and accepted in society. Since "fools" had not been educated and could not be expected to appreciate the niceties of etiquette, social status and ranking, they were given social license to offend. After all, they were "only fools".

Second, there was the tradition of the "clever fool", the person who saw that the common fool was on to a good thing. The clever fools realised, in other words, that by playing the fool they could offend against etiquette, social status and ranking, and if the heat came down on them they could excuse themselves by saying, "After all, I am only a fool". There was in fact an explosion of fooling in the late medieval period from the domestic and village levels right up to the levels of the papacy and the royal courts.

Third, there was the tradition which made it especially hard for Christians to consider the notion in a positive light, the tradition of the

"controversial fool". Both in its pre-Christian origins and in its medieval outworkings the notion of folly had deeply pagan overtones. It had long been associated with primitive ideas about divine possession and sacrificial scapegoating, and, in the form of the Feast of Fools, medieval folly took over from the Roman Feast of Kalends and gave annual license to bawdiness and blasphemy. Only with great difficulty had the Church stamped this out so, not surprisingly, the image of jesters, jugglers and fools was rather suspect to most Christians by the time of the Renaissance.

With such an unlikely background the Christian appropriation of the notion of folly was all the more extraordinary, but what writers like Erasmus did was take the pagan notion of folly and turn it on its head, and in so doing go back to an understanding of folly which was at once profoundly biblical and deeply effective.

Finally, to appreciate Erasmus' notion of foolmaking we need to see the Christian categories of folly in which it makes sense. From a biblical perspective there are three main types of fool, theologically speaking. The first type is what we might call the "fool proper". This is the person who before God actually *is* a fool. Proverbs and Psalms are littered with examples of such fools. Psalm 14, for example, speaks of the fool who says in his heart that there is no God. Thus folly in a fallen world may be relative, and everything depends on who says so. But there are some people who are fools because God says so. This is the category of the "fool proper" and an example of a medieval use of this category—which is no direct help to us in our problem—is Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools*.

The second type of fool is one which we might call the "fool-bearer". This is the person who is not actually a fool in himself before God, but is viewed and treated as one by the world because of his faithfulness to God. Thus the world, in self-styled wisdom which is actually folly, misunderstands true wisdom and treats it as folly, although it is actually wise. The fool-bearer is thus the fool for Christ. Plainly, as this last phrase shows, the words themselves go back to 1 Corinthians 4:10. "You are such sensible Christians", Paul says, "but we are fools for Christ". The idea, however, is far older and can be found throughout the Bible. David, for instance, danced with joy before the Lord that his own wife considered him a fool, while Jeremiah was treated as a laughing stock and Job became the butt of comedy to his own former friends. But supremely in Scripture, Jesus himself is God's own fool as the Praetorian Guard makes him a mock king, putting a reed sceptre in his hands and pressing a crown of thorns on his head.

This notion of the Christian as fool-bearer flowed down into Christian history and has been a powerful motif in discipleship and sanctification. Among those who have made significant use of it are John Chrysostom, Peter Damian and Francis of Assisi (who called his followers *"moriones mundi"*). It is a deeply important spiritual theme, but it does not go far enough by itself to aid us in our problem.

The third type of fool—the foolmaker—is the one which helps us

directly. The foolmaker is the person who plays the fool or is prepared to be taken as a fool, but only so as to turn the tables on those who consider themselves wise, high and mighty and so on. If 1 Corinthians 4:10 is a biblical example of Paul as a fool-maker, then 1 Corinthians 1 is Paul's powerful example of God as divine foolmaker. To subvert the world's wisdom, power and sense of status, the divine foolmaker uses what the world counts as folly, weakness and nonentities and thus turns the tables on its futile pretensions.

The supreme sixteenth century example of Christian foolmaking was Erasmus' *The Praise of Folly* and the difference between that work and Brandt's *Ship of Fools* is obvious. By the time Mother Folly has finished her capers, two things are clear: on the one hand, that everyone is a fool *except the fool*; and on the other hand that the fool, Mother Folly, is actually the wisdom of Christ in disguise. My concern with Erasmus is not with the substance of his arguments—my sympathies at that point are with Martin Luther—but with his style. Three things come together in *The Praise of Folly* in a simple but effective way.

First, it was the right age for such a style. In a simpler and more straightforward age it would have been redundant. But when the world was so relativistic and the Church so worldly, things were so inside out and upside down that only a different style of communication could succeed, subverting by surprise. Second, the Christian faith was the right "sort of truth" for such a style. Not every type of faith or belief can communicate with the same creativity and flexibility. There are certain secular beliefs, for instance, which are so rooted in, and restricted to, the here and now that they have nothing by which to relativise and judge them. They have no heaven from which to relativise the earth. Equally, certain forms of mysticism have the opposite problem. That "real truth", always behind the apparent truth, is never discoverable. But as the veils are stripped away one suspects that the truth behind the truth is no truth at all. Thus, instead of being funny, the infinite regress becomes an echoing laughter which threatens to make one mad. With the Christian faith, by contrast, God's truth relativises human understanding just as heaven always judges the earth and the infinite always calls into question the finite. But mercifully one is not left with a receding echo. The buck stops with God's truth. Third, Erasmus and those who followed him in using this style had the right type of minds. They were flexible, creative, skilful in using irony and well able to handle this sort of communication brilliantly. This was not true of all Christians then, as witnessed by Martin Dorp's earnest but misguided review of *The Praise of Folly* , and our lack in this area today is a key source of weakness in Christian communication, especially in Britain.

The Possibility of Recovery Today

What is the possibility of rediscovering such an approach today? For that to be possible, let alone desirable, our whole understanding of what is

involved will have to be developed according to biblical truths rather than purely pragmatic techniques. Needless to say, supplying a comprehensive theology to support this approach would be impossible here, but let me just make two simple points. First, have you noticed the degree of flexibility in biblical communication? If you study the different styles of communication in the Bible, it is apparent that there is a continuum of approaches possible. They are stretched out between the two poles of approaches suitable for those who are almost totally open to faith and those are almost totally closed. My own suggested candidate for the choice of the most open person in Scripture would be the Philippian gaoler. You will notice that the Apostle Paul's response to his question is simpler and more straightforward than the simplest evangelistic approach today. That is typical of the biblical response when people are open. One should not take a second longer or be a word more circuitous and complicated than necessary. On the other hand, as people show themsleves less open, intellectually, morally or spiritually, so you notice that God speaks in ways that are appropriate to the amount of their closure and blindness. In Numbers 12, for example, the Lord says that he talks to the ordinary people through the prophets, to prophets through visions, but face to face only to Moses. Or in Isaiah 28 God reminds the prophet that Isaiah is not talking baby language to innocents, but that if the people persist in their rebellion God will speak to them in like manner—through brutal foreign armies.

Second, have you noticed an intriguing blindspot in evangelical applications of biblical principles of communication? It would be a commonplace in conservative circles—and rightly so—to insist that repentance is a prerequisite for conversion. Very few people would argue against that. But how many conservatives also notice the truth that accompanies it in Scripture: namely, that any communication which has the turn-around of repentance as its goal will need to carry the same turn-around in its own styles and structures.

The best way to illustrate this point is to outline some of the biblical examples of creative persuasion. In each of these the very method itself, and not merely its goal, has within it the same subversive dynamic as the goal which is their aim. Obviously these approaches are specially appropriate to people who are closed, just as they would be wrong for use with people who are open. Notice too that, to some degree or other, each of these approaches succeeds because it is not direct, detached and prosaically dull but indirect, involving and imaginative. One example is the use of questions in Scripture, such as God's response to Adam and Eve after the Fall, to Job when his doubt leads him to blasphemy or, supremely, to the critical and obtuse by Jesus himself. Samuel Johnson once remarked that questioning is not a mode of conversation among gentlemen. God, in that case, is not a gentleman, for it is clear that God was a gadfly long before Socrates. Where unbelief is likely to trudge around in a routine circle of its own presuppositions, a statement would be deflected without a thought but a question forces a new entry point into the circle of presuppositions.

8

It therefore increases the likelihood of a new point of exit from the old circle of presuppositions. Other examples are the biblical use of parables (such as Nathan's to David), object lessons (such as Jeremiah's use of the non-drinking Rechabites) and so on. In each case an essential biblical feature emerges strongly, and one that is very different from contemporary Western practices—the story (or parable or whatever) does not so much illustrate the truth, it *is* the truth.

I am not suggesting that this style of persuasive communication is uniquely Christian. It is deeply human and despite modern rationalism, current examples can be found. Bertolt Brecht, for example, employed what he used to call "defamiliarising" or "alienating" techniques with the same goal in mind. But considering the brilliant precedents in Christian history as well as the profundity of the underlying theological rationale, it is clear that no one has more of a right to this than Christians. Sadly, however, this type of communication is all too rare today, although a small but important tradition in apologetics has kept it alive in our own country. Perhaps the leading figure in this was G. K. Chesterton, who faced a task similar to that of Erasmus. The average Englishman, Chesterton said, did not know the Gospel because he knew it too well. It would have been easier to speak to a Chinaman than an Englishman because the Chinaman saw things freshly and therefore fairly. Chesterton therefore became a master of the use of wit, incongruity and surprise. Through G. K. Chesterton, of course, the approach passed down to Tolkien, who introduced it to C. S. Lewis.

Are there not Problems in this Approach?

I am deeply aware that what I have argued is merely suggestive, rather than systematic. I am also aware that there is a whole cluster of questions and objections that need to be answered if this approach is to be pursued further. Perhaps the most common objection is that this approach requires a level of education and sophistication far beyond the average person. Quite the opposite, I suggest, is the case. If most of us find ourselves incapable or out of practice with this approach, it is because we have been incapacitated by Western philosophy and education. I admit that all I have shared with you is virtually the confession of a repentant, prosaic literalist, since much of my own education has systematically squeezed out familiarity with this creative, ironic, subversive approach. The discipline of apologetics is so close to that of philosophy that it is particularly affected by this problem, but the creative approach flourishes unnoticed in fields such as poetry and drama—in fields, in other words, where the creative approach is used naturally and instinctively. An obvious example is the subversive quality in many of Steve Turner's poems.

A different kind of objection is that this approach needs a rigorous philosophical description if it is not to sound merely poetic, if not fanciful.

That is certainly an important challenge, although an adequate response to it would require an essay in itself. To put the matter briefly, however, the overall task of creative persuasion is to communicate so that a person is transferred from one circle of faith (or horizon of meaning) to another. To effect this successfully, the communication itself—whether a parable or play or whatever—moves through at least three stages. First, there is a *tension assumed* (David, for instance, is a murderer, but has drowned out consciousness of it when Nathan talks to him). Second, there is a *fusion achieved* (through his parable Nathan creates a shared world with David who becomes highly involved.) Third, there is a *subversion effected* (Nathan's punchline, "You are the man!" leads to David's conviction.) This is a mere hint of a possible hermeneutical description that could be made, but it indicates that the approach is not merely fanciful. It can be given a rigorous philosophical description.

One final objection is that this approach seems to smack of the danger of manipulation. But I suggest to you again that, when you examine it more closely, the reverse is the case. Much contemporary evangelism and apologetics are unquestionably manipulative, but there is a simple reason why this approach is not: no one comes to any conclusion that they do not reach themselves. Since the approach is indirect, involving and imaginative, the conclusion is never spelt out by the communicator—it is drawn by the recipients themselves.

Having said that, there is an objection to this approach which is inescapable. It has a sting in the tail which must be borne. The temptation is to view the approach as a technique or method but, biblically speaking, it is only secondarily a technique. Primarily it is a manner or a means of participating in the life of Christ himself. To put it differently, this type of creative subversion is at the very heart of the Incarnation. When man sinned and went away from God, God became man to bring man back. When men in their folly thought their wisdom so wise that they missed the wisdom of God and thought it folly, God allowed his wisdom to be seen as folly to subvert that wisdom. He was rich yet for our sakes became poor so that we, through his poverty, might become rich. He was without sin yet became sin for us that we might be saved from sin.

At point after point it is clear that this type of dynamic subversion is at the very heart of the Incarnation itself. The question therefore is not, "Is this a technique that we can use?" but, "Is this a truth in which we are prepared to participate sacrificially as the pattern of the Incarnation indicates?" Nothing less than that is the task of the apologist.

There were two symbols for apologetics in the Middle Ages. The first was the closed fist, which represented the force of close-knit relationship, particularly useful in destroying other people's arguments. The second symbol was the open hand, which represented the wisdom of Christ in terms of spiritual eloquence, creative, imaginative and appealing. Apologists at that time believed passionately and equally in both symbols, and both are

well represented in the Scriptures. Contemporary apologetics, however, are absurdly overbalanced in the direction of the closed fist. Yet if our contemporaries are as tone deaf and colour blind as it appears, what we need today, and should work and pray for, I suggest, is revival of the open hand.