



## Transcriptions

### Biblical Metaphors of Purpose

Ted Ward

**Annotation:** *Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, TX, 1982. Series: Metaphors of Spiritual Reality.* This is the first of four lectures on *Metaphors of Spiritual Reality*. In this lecture Ted Ward names purpose as a transcendent human need and identifies stories in Scripture that speak to purpose. The published version of this address can be found in the Document Archives.



This is my first occasion to speak on this campus and it is a distinct privilege; one that fulfills a sort of youthful aspiration, I suspect, because the Dallas Theological Seminary has always had a warm spot in my heart. When I was an early teenager, our pastor was a fervent graduate of this seminary. What other kind is there? And I came through him to know something of the power of the Pauline epistles. And furthermore I came to understand what it means to commit my life to full-time service for our Lord Jesus Christ toward which I still am committed.

I was asked to talk about education and in this series of four lectures, we will be talking about education particularly in reference to the real purpose that we have in educational ministry in and for the church: spiritual development. We're concerned distinctly about the spiritual reality and the role that education played in their maturation. My particular concern is for education that is Christian. This set of four lectures here reflect my belief that any responsible view of education, whether religious or secular, must deal with four matters and these four matters constitute the structure of the four lectures.

Purpose is the first of these—today, biblical metaphors of purpose. What does one assume to be the purpose and outcome of educational process or educational program? Taken in the largest sense, life purpose itself must be a foundation of responsible educational planning.

The second foundation that we will deal with tomorrow is the matter of development. What one assumes to be the nature of development and maturational processes determines to a great extent what is and what is not appropriate as education.

The third theme, and perhaps the most obvious matter, is how one sees education, itself. All sorts of things are called education. It is one of the common places of life. We all learn. We all teach. We all participate in the formal and in the informal institutions of society that serve to educate us. When we deliberately educate or purposefully choose educational experiences, what criteria do we use to decide what should and what should not be done?

The fourth matter and the fourth lecture, perhaps less commonly associated with education except among those of us who are curriculum specialists, is a professional issue with profound implications for the worth of an educational enterprise: What do we take the future to be? Every planned educational outcome reflects some sort of a view of the future; thus, we cannot talk qualitatively about education without examining our assumptions and beliefs about what we cannot yet see. As a Christian, I take by faith that there is a spiritual reality in human life and, thus, there are limits to what can be determined empirically. But I reject the dichotomistic view in which spiritual reality is seen apart from the natural manifestations in which it is incarnate. Given these presuppositions, it should come to you as no surprise that I would ask you to examine the ways you think about these matters. Through this series of lectures, I am inviting you to examine carefully the ways that you conceptualize education, development, and the purpose of spiritual development. I propose that we do this by examining the metaphors that are lodged in our thought processes for it is in the mental pictures, metaphors, analogies, parables, and images which the human mind uses to form manageable constructs. Without these, thought would be a vast disjointed sprawl of bits and pieces, snatches of memory, and competing information; a file folder with no label.

As a background for this series, it is useful for us to consider language and perception. Becoming familiar with the way our linguistics reflect and even control and limit our thinking can help to keep us humble. We are a peculiar people. If you don't believe that, just listen to the way we talk. We surely have our own lingo. We use terms that other people never hear except when they listen in on us. Consider, for example, some of our big words: propitiation, millennium, pneumatology. And our little words: grace, contrite, rapture, just to name a few. Recently we managed to popularize one of our own terms: born again. Now that anybody uses it any way they choose, we probably wish we hadn't, but more important are the common use words that we invest with odd meanings ignoring the resultant irony. Service is such a word. In Christian doctrine and church history, service is central as helps to those in need within the fellowship and as ministry of compassion to those in the outer society. Our Lord set an example of service. So what has service become? It's something you have; you have services. You go to service, and at every opportunity we use the word to describe that passive leader-dominated event that once was called worship. I suspect that a linguistic researcher would find that our children first learn to use the word in such whispered sentences as, when will the service be over.

A related problem arises from lack of theological discipline in how we use our peculiar words. Consider, for example, ministry. Is it something you do *to* people, *for* people, or *with* people?

Not long ago one of my colleagues described the lack of vitality in many youth ministries as resulting from the defining of ministry as something you do *to* someone. He sees his denomination as being in big trouble because people can't get it through their heads that ministry is for all Christians. Adults persist in seeing youth ministry as ministering *to* young people instead of developing the ministry of youth. The need is for vehicles through which young people can become active in ministry.

Now that any distinctive group in society would have peculiar vocabulary and would share among themselves a unique way to use words is not surprising. That some of these uses would be more defensible than others can be expected. I do intend to go beyond these common places and identify a more basic problem: words and vocabulary are the codes of our mental processes and the linkages of our social interactions. Certain key words and key phrases are the sub-routines of our mental computers. Note how I say this, illustrating my point by using the computer as a key word to conceptualize the human mind. Such key words we call "metaphors."

To the reader of the New Testament, the [parable of the] Good Samaritan communicates a Christian value. At the level of literal vocabulary, Good Samaritan, says only good rather than bad; person from Samaria rather than from somewhere else. That's literal. But the meaning of experiences in this particular good person from Samaria speaks volumes. These two words together: Good Samaritan, communicate an idea in a context. They are a metaphor of the Christian's social responsibility. The Bible reader becomes very familiar with a huge array of metaphors and allegories. Even though we claim to be literal in our handling of the Bible, we can recognize figurative examples when we do come across them.

Basic to the scholarly traditions are category systems, names for things, and taxonomy. Taxonomies classify things in regard to the shared and their unique qualities. The language of scholarship reflects human understanding of the way things are understood and assumed to be. But names and categories often do not adequately relate to reality. For example, within academic theology the distinction between Christology and Anthropology is obvious enough until you take the incarnation seriously. The line between Exegesis and Hermeneutics is fine and arbitrary; between Pastoral Theology and Christian Education the line is barely logical. We draw such lines in order to manage our tasks. Since Adam, it has been a human responsibility to name the Creation. The danger lies in taking our terminology and our classification systems too seriously. Taxonomies are always flawed. The doctrine of original sin warns us of that.

Many of our arguments, as Christians, arise over differences in the way we use words; the way we categorize our realities. The rigidity of fixed meanings sometimes prevents deeper understanding. Now we should not conclude that discriminating judgment is dead. Surely, when Adam obeyed God's command to name the animals, he used the basic skills of discrimination. I can just hear him: Since that last one is a horse, this one is surely a non-horse, so I'll call it a bullfrog. Ever since, dividing the world into horses and bullfrogs has been popular; too popular. Oversimplified dichotomies result in all sorts of problems. God expects us to discriminate and to use good judgment: "Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it." But when discrimination between good and evil becomes an end in itself, we get too busy to pursue peace. We may laugh about the good guys/bad guys approach to understanding human experience and we can assume an air of superiority in the presence of white hat/black hat symbolism. Surely, we're too smart to be influenced by such an oversimplified view of life. I wonder. If not kept in submission to the larger awareness that the gospel is freely offered for all, the tendency to shun the bad guys and to avoid every appearance of sin—well, certain sins anyway—can reduce us to smug caricatures of

what our Lord intends. Never forget that some of his earliest critics accused him of bad judgment about the company he kept and the places he went.

Theology students are generally well acquainted with the classical ways of dealing with problems and hermeneutics. Dallas students especially are well known for their exegetical rigor. Indeed, a commitment to the doctrines of the inspired Word make all Christians more or less concerned about matters of biblical text, meanings, and applications. What does the Bible say? What does it mean? How should I apply what it says? Answering these important questions is made more difficult because the biblical languages are not our vocabulary, are not our vernacular. But the matter of meanings is far more than a linguistic question. Most of the crucial questions of biblical meaning can be traced to experiential differences. Isaiah 55, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.” This is the simplest explanation. God uses it.

The communication of God to man is severely impacted by the limitations and variations of human experience. Donald Grey Barnhouse was once challenged on this matter: You have a concept of God in human terms, don't you? his critic asked, to which Dr. Barnhouse replied, What other concept is there? Clearly, God is not mystically communicated by the word “God” or even by “Yahweh”. Nor is God, in our minds, apart from what the Scriptures teach and what our minds bring to the words and the metaphors of the Scripture. Of these things we most surely must be humbled. When the French read *le chien*, we may be well aware that the German would read *der hund*. The creature's bark would sound the same regardless of the language, but only in English would it be written bow wow wow. When even a monolingual group of people such as we have here today think about “dog,” the variations in our thoughts are wide-ranging. We would need to specify size, color, breed, temperament, and age to get in common enough to be able to think together about any particular dog. Such observations are the standard stuff of communication theory and communication research. But I'm asking you to go even beyond this problem of semantics to think about the matter of larger ideas, especially the abstractions which are essential to any religious system.

In our particular concern for biblical Christianity, we are vitally concerned with how people think about such matters as God, sin, redemption, and righteousness. We can work all week long on what these words mean. Dallas students are good at it. We can reassure ourselves by giving tests that ask for the standard definitions. Dallas professors are good at it. We can argue that these words mean such and such in the Hebrew and such and such in the Greek. We can even further investigate what they likely meant to the people in biblical times. Admirable, admirable effort, and defensible in the name of responsible scholarship. But since none of us is a Greek or a Jew of the times of biblical authorship, our understandings will always be those of outsiders perceiving at great distance. Further, even when we close that distance as best we can through careful scholarship, we find that, awkwardly, those Greeks and those Hebrews of those times were also human beings; people with wide-ranging differences among their experiences and, thus, among their perceptions.

Once I was a definitions freak. I thought that if you could just get together on the meanings of words all sorts of dissonance would disappear; disagreement would be no more. Yes, you have to try to agree on definitions if you're to have any sort of worthy dialogue and literature, but if scholarship in human development has taught me anything it is to beware the glib assumption that perception is based in language. It is not. It is based in all the realms of human experience. You can arrive at a sociological or a biological definition of “father” and agree that it is a correct and accepted definition, but you will never find another person whose mental associations with “father” are

exactly the same as yours. Yet, the Holy Spirit chose to use this word as the key metaphor of human grasp of the being of God: “Our Heavenly *Father* . . .” Of these things we must be most humble.

I tend to use a useful exercise to reflect on how we think about such things. I often use word association exercises to help people become more aware of the ways that their experiences have shaped their perceptions. Tomorrow we may try such a thing as that right here. Today I want to take a brief excursion with you into the biblical metaphors of purpose. Ours is a competitive society. We compete as a nation with any and all economic or military aspirants to world domination. If we compete through industry, we call it free enterprise. Competition through sports is our largest recreational investment. We even compete within families. As intensive competitors will, we take a win/lose view of almost everything. Our form of Christianity was, thus, invested with all sorts of notions about winning and losing. For many of us, our sense of purpose is far beyond the Westminster Shorter Catechism’s keynote: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” Indeed, our chief end is to win souls, keep count, and to present ourselves worthy to the great scorekeeper of the sky at the end of the game whereupon, in the best tradition of Greek games, he will place a winner’s crown upon our head.

Vernon Grounds identifies preoccupation with this sort of quantitative success as sinful idolatry. The great theme word is opportunity. God gives us lots of them. We use them well, that is we *take advantage of the opportunity*, or we fail; that is, we *lose the opportunity*. When we fail, often as not it is because we didn’t *seize on the opportunity*. Thus, we disappoint our Lord and lose a round in the great game of life. At the theological level, there are some problems with all this, of course. Whether we are to be judged or not is a nagging question. Like habitual winners, we want a voice in making rules so we really don’t want to be judged in any negative sense, just recognized and rewarded. So we say, we aren’t to be judged, but those stars in the crown look mighty appealing. I surely wouldn’t want to be seen walking around heaven without a well-loaded crown. Think of the shame and the embarrassment of it. Metaphor: heaven as a place to continue the habit of showing off or feeling gilded.

Our Americanized system of spiritual free enterprise makes us vulnerable to a sense of guilt. We don’t dare disappoint God. But it is hard to measure up to the always in high gear image of the intensive competitor. The race we are running demands some pauses for breath and nourishment and one’s self image as a go-go winner gets bent all out of shape. Guilt and failure are too much with us so they must be hidden. Don’t let others know; it increases the guilt. It might even cause a brother to stumble. The matter of purpose is transcendent. Christians, of all people, need a theologically sound answer to the persistent human question: What is life all about? Why are we here? Purpose, especially for Americans, too readily calls up the metaphor of game or contest. Life is a great game. We are in a contest. Purpose of life tends to be mentally processed in terms of what I do, what I bring to the game, how well I play it. So in one era we Americans seek fulfillment of our manifest destiny and in another we wage a war to end all wars. We even evangelize through crusades in bloodless stadiums and on television. Now we’re on a mechanistic kick. After faintly baptizing the linear logic of the business world, we set goals, specify objectives, have endless series of consultations and seminars culminating in grand reviews of strategy usually in the farthest corners of the earth and invite God in to bless our insights. All of these metaphors are more cultural than biblical because of compulsive purposing in the name of Jesus Christ. We could be seen as the first generation of Christians to encourage the Holy Spirit into premature retirement. Have we come to this? Not yet.

Among those of us who have been urging Christian educators to tap more thoroughly the major fields of scholarship and research, there is a growing anxiety that we are using new concepts and procedures most badly. It is beyond the scope of this lecture to deal with the whole of that problem, but since I think it starts with this faulty metaphor, that is, purpose as being game, I wish to suggest some correctives. Most of all, we need a larger view; a more complete view of who we are and why we're here. Since we have no meaning apart from the wholeness which we have in Jesus Christ, we must get serious about what it means to be spiritual beings. We are here in physical existence as creatures of God's creative hand. Our every breath exalts the Creator. And we are here, as spiritual beings, as evidences of God's redemptive process. As those of us who are spiritually alive through faith in the redeeming work of Christ, our discipleship includes responsibilities in the physical universe: exploring, naming, understanding, and responsibly using that Creation of which we are a part. Ours is a scientific responsibility as well as a compassionate concern for the well-being of the whole of the groaning Creation. As human beings, we are inquirers into the nature of things from the stars of the night skies to the mysteries of human interaction. Christians beyond all people should take these responsibilities seriously.

We do not well to scorn Adam, Copernicus or Darwin. We are all mortal. Error is an inherent accompaniment of human inquiry. Truth is there. We perceive through less than perfect lenses. Ours is a walk of faith, not just the mouthing of a formula of faith words. The spread of the gospel is impeded by verbal Christianity that puts words ahead of action.

Two specific metaphors of our purpose and function are given by our Lord: "You are the salt of the earth," he said to his disciples in Matthew 5. Salt's relative commonness, its elemental simplicity, its humble status are balanced over against its persistence, its power to preserve, and its importance in larger compounds. Salt is not particularly noisy, but it can't be stopped from doing its thing.

"You are the light of the world," our Lord said. In this metaphor, our Lord includes us in a description he also made of himself, "I am the light of the world," John 8. Light does not aim itself. Light is not preoccupied about its consequences. Light is just light. A marvelous form of energy capable of replacing darkness; not subduing it as in some kind of a wrestling contest, but just by the nature of its presence. So much of the world still awaits a meaningful encounter with the person of Jesus Christ.

I thank God for the current vigorous campaign to re-direct mission outreach activities toward unreached people. At the same time, I fervently pray that this enthusiasm won't become just one more clever movement. The story of missions in the second half of this century includes too many cases where smart managers and visionary promoters figured out really neat schemes to show God how to get on with the job. A far better strategy is to confess that the job is beyond our understanding and to open ourselves to see what God is already doing and to ask God if he would somehow let us help. In this matter, we have to be secure enough with God and with ourselves to accept the gentle "no" that may sometimes wound our pride and trigger a compulsive dash into the thick of things no matter what damage results. 'Pushiness for Jesus' should not be our bumper sticker.

I do not speak abstractly. The lessons we are learning about what God has done in his own ways, through his church in China, are sobering. We can see that God has resources other than North American Christians. Now, can we trust God enough to prayerfully seek out the Holy Spirit's

activity in the Muslim world? Evangelism is our joy. When instead evangelism is our business, our task, and our main job, its forms become mechanical and its message becomes brassy. Our purpose is to glorify God. We can each glorify God in the thousand-and-one private and public thoughts and acts of life. Glorifying God has a personal aspect, a corporate aspect, and a public aspect. Jesus Christ is at the center of each of these. The Holy Spirit energizes each. But evangelism is our joy. The privilege and thrill of making the name of Christ heard clearly in the din and bustle of life, always in the context of the good news: the kingdom of God is at hand. Through this joy, we share in the Lord's redeeming of his lost world. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, whose missiological insights I deeply respect, recently wrote the following,

In the communication of the gospel, word and act belong together. The word is essential, because the name of Jesus cannot be replaced by anything else. But the deed is equally essential because the gospel is the good news of the presence of the reign of God and because this presence is to be made manifest in a world which has fallen under the usurped dominion of the evil one. . . . Where . . . the church invites men and women to take refuge in the name of Jesus without this challenge to the dominion of evil, then it becomes . . . a sign against the sovereignty of God. An 'evangelism' that seeks to evade this challenge and this conflict, which—for example—welcomes brutal tyranny because it allows free entry for missionaries rather than a more humane regime that puts difficulties in their way, becomes a sign against the gospel of the kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

The need today is not to adopt a broader view of evangelism as John Arnott recommended in the '30s, but to grasp the wholeness that is evangelism. We don't need a new term; not even holistic evangelism, but we need to refreshen an old concept: biblical evangelism as modeled by Jesus Christ, the man of compassion. Our Lord wept over humankind's separation from God, yet he ministered healing to the physical needs of people, respecting the way they defined their problem; and he respected the need for people to reflect and to come to their own conclusion. He let perplexed seekers go off into the night to further scratch their heads. He defended his listeners' capability of reflecting on abstract propositions when he gave them concrete parables. *What a man!* He knew his purpose so well that he could discern what sort of learning experiences would be consistent and what would be inconsistent with that purpose. To this basic knowledge he added a necessary skill: he listened very well, and he wrapped the whole process in a warmth and tenderness that even encouraged children to come to him. *What a teacher!*

The purpose of education cannot be examined apart from the purpose of life. The stimulating and deepening of human development is a whole person issue. The dichotomizing mind tends to split up the person into sectors or aspects. Metaphor: person as a collection of parts. In such a view, the intellectual function and to some extent the physical function are seen as the objects of education. Metaphor: Athens and Sparta as the two choices of educational emphasis. When the intellectual aspect is presumed to be a more exalted representation of deity, the choice is made for Athens; and what is chosen as learning activity is intellectual experience regardless of the costs or benefits in the other sectors of the person. This dichotomized view forces unnecessary choices. Current educational philosophy is raising now again some of the questions that the Greeks tried to clarify particularly the question of praxis. Is it possible to learn truth apart from the practice of truth, that is, applied experience? As a Christian in education I welcome the renewed concern for praxis.

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<sup>1</sup> Lesslie Newbigin. Cross-currents in Ecumenical and Evangelical Understandings of Mission. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*. October 1982: 146-151

During most of its history, the New Testament church has drawn its values and metaphors of education more from Aristotelian Greek thought than from the authentic background of Christian philosophy: Hebrew culture. Praxis forces us back to a Hebrew epistemology and to a biblical valuing of knowledge as that which is acted upon. The Hellenistic satisfaction, on the other hand, with static content of the mind—though it is deeply embedded now in Christian education—is being challenged today by a whole person concern for truth in action; much closer to Jesus’ own claim that truth was not to be defined apart from its incarnation: “I am the Truth,” of John 14.

Theological education is being affected by this shift. All over the world, especially where the church is experiencing its most substantial growth, theological education is becoming more praxis-oriented and more concerned that the time-honored memorization of lists be at least balanced by applied and functional learning. At the risk of offending a brother or two, I share with you a personal burden: the metaphor of distillery applies far too aptly to much that is called theological education. The establishment ferments the good grain in large vats, boils it down, catches the steam in coiled tubes, puts it in branded barrels, ages it, bottles it, and keeps its price just high enough that the common person tends to wonder if there isn’t a cheaper way to meet his needs. Thus, there is a substantially larger market for beer. Metaphor: beer as pop religion, pop psychology, and cheapened Christianity. Would that all theological education were centered on the incarnation; not only would it be Christ-honoring, but it would be Christ-imitating. Our Lord was the Word made flesh.

Education can be the truth made flesh; not just some sort of an encounter with ideas; not just a passing on of tests of recall; not just the airy-fairy abstractions of intellectual debate, but a gutsy hands-on intensive learning through action in the walks of life. Our Lord didn’t lecture about how to relate to blind people and beggars. He taught through example. He showed his disciples a way of life. He walked and taught. He shared. He lived his way of educating. In the name of what sort of economic advantage, what sort of scarcity, what sort of better way can we take pride in doing less? “I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly” [John 10: 10]. “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners” [Luke 5. 32]. “I have not come of myself, but he who sent me, is true” [John 7: 28]. For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind” [John 9:39]. “I am come as light into the world, that everyone who believes in me may not remain in darkness” [John 12:46].

In the service of this Lord, education must help us serve the needs of people. We are to make disciples of his way. His way is not fulfilled in a neurotic and anxious fussing and bickering about verbal definition. His way is not properly represented as a proud exclusivism. His way is nothing less than the way of the cross—a giving, a sharing, a clear testimony of actions and words that point the observer toward the One who is greater. Our servanthood is not an apprenticeship to prove our humility while we await promotion, but our servanthood is, as was our Lord’s, a servanthood to death seeking no glory. Thus, our purpose is his joy now and yet to come; serving his purposes now, assisting in his processes of redemption now, and yet to come; proclaiming the good news of his kingdom now, and yet to come. Amen.