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## "Keepers Of The Light" Conference 2000 Keynote Address

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# "KEEPERS OF THE LIGHT"

## CONFERENCE 2000 KEYNOTE ADDRESS

*Donna Fletcher Crow is an author of historical fiction tracing the roots of Christianity in England, Scotland and Ireland.*

*She delivered this keynote address for the opening session of the ACL Conference, Point Loma Nazarene University, San Diego, California, June 14, 2000*

I want to tell you about a pilgrimage I made a few years ago to a wonderful library. I took the train to Hereford, right on the border between England and Wales, and made my way to the cathedral, an ancient sandstone building dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The organist was practicing, filling the ancient vaulted spaces with soaring, sacred melodies as I climbed the narrow, winding slate stairway to the famous chained library in the back corner of the building.

At the top of the stairs I was met with an extraordinary sight: row after row of leather-bound illuminated manuscripts – some 1,500 in all, the largest collection in the world – some volumes were on shelves reaching above my head, some spread on tables. But, wherever they were placed, each volume had a chain running through its backing and was locked in place with a heavy padlock, as they had been since medieval times. Why? Because these books were of such great monetary value that they might be stolen?

No, these books were in no danger of thievery by the holy men and women who came to Hereford to study them. On the contrary, the chains kept the monks and scholars from studying the books too closely – in their own rooms. It would not do for the knowledge contained in these books to be unavailable to all who came here from every corner of Europe seeking enlightenment.

Throughout the dark ages when Europe was repeatedly overrun by barbarians, libraries were the repositories of knowledge and truth. All learning would have died out in the Fifth and Sixth

centuries had these institutions not been strong bastions of education.

Today we face a similar, but much more subtle, threat to learning. We are threatened with descent into a new dark age. A dark age of thought – or really, anti-thought. Today's barbarians are of the most sophisticated variety. They don't attack with spears and battering rams, but rather, with ideas. And the prevailing idea of our time is that words have no commonality of meaning, that texts have no inherent meaning and therefore the stories they tell cannot speak across the ages. Worst of all, this comes to us from the very places that should be working with us to preserve the culture of books: from the academy, and – albeit inadvertently – from the church.

Through the ages libraries have always been lighthouses that have kept men and women's minds from foundering on the dark shores of barbarianism. If we are to keep the light of knowledge burning strong as we sail forth into the new millennium there are two flames of which we must be especially protective in the lighthouses we have been set to keep – two flames which the current intellectual and spiritual gales threaten to extinguish. All the force and fury of a mighty hurricane is flinging itself at: The flame of communication and The flame of worship.

### GUARDING THE FLAME OF COMMUNICATION

The barbarians that would extinguish the flame of meaningful communication were defined by Richard John Neuhaus in a recent issue of *First Things*. "Barbarians today, as in

classical Greece, are defined as those who are outside the civilizational circle of conversation about how we ought to order our life together, about the meaning of right and wrong, good and evil. They are those who know nothing, and insist that nothing can be known, about such matters.”<sup>1</sup>

These postmodern barbarians claim that the difficulties of communication are so overwhelming that real communication is impossible, that values cannot be defined, that we must live in a world without standards of right and wrong. Thus spake deconstruction, and thus deconstruction steals away the “word” by which we think, communicate, reason, and inspire. It steals our community of language, and leaves us lost in silence. Like the ship in Mark Twain’s *The Enchanted Sea Wilderness*.

In this story a ship wanders into a great area of the ocean where “no compass has any value.”<sup>2</sup> The compass suddenly loses all ability to plot direction, leaving the ship and crew in a universal paralysis where the only active thing is the compass whirling around in a frenzy of fear. Without words as a means of finding and communicating values we, too, are directionless.

This is not to say that difficulties in the shared use of language do not exist. And this is not to say that texts have only one possible meaning. But through the ages there have been certain things that have been agreed upon. And then over there are areas on which we have not found agreement. The Deconstructionist looks at this area of uncertainty and says, “Aha! We cannot agree, there is no commonality of meaning.” It’s like going to an art gallery and seeing a chip on the frame of a great painting and declaring, “See, there is no beauty.”

The academy is being defeated by difference. And the future of the culture of books depends on whether we are defeated by our differences or inspired by them to work together to continue the dialectic to find new meanings. The key is to acknowledge our differences—even to celebrate

them—we serve a God of infinite variety and no one system can reflect all the aspects of His nature. But we must realize as well that He is also a God of perfect harmony. He is a God of order and reason, not of chaos. Centered in the fact of who God is, we can move forward, meaningfully, purposefully together.

#### KEEPING WORDS ALIGHT

Notwithstanding the differences and difficulties, words have actually communicated since the beginning of time – across centuries, from one culture to another, in countless contexts as they help us to see, if only we will let them, what is good, what is true, what is beautiful, and what is common to the human condition.

The plays of William Shakespeare have been communicating within and beyond our culture for 400 years. Yes, each age interprets the themes in the light of its own situations—that is much of the plays’ genius: I suspect that Kate in “Taming of the Shrew” was played

*Through the ages libraries have always been lighthouses that have kept men and women’s minds from foundering on the dark shores of barbarianism.*

quite differently a century ago from the way she is played today. But the words still communicate, and resonate with continuities in the human condition.

Words continue to speak to us today, with meanings we can understand from the oldest known human writings, from long before there was such a thing as Western culture. And one of the things they say to us is that the words themselves—the marrow of communication—were highly valued then and should be highly valued now. Let me give you some examples:

The Hebrew scriptures placed such a high value on communication through words, that the creation story describes God’s very method of creation as being by His Word.

Words—and their use in thought, reasoning and language—became the midwife of Western civilization in ancient Athens, through the dialogues of Socrates, Plato’s *Republic*, and Aristotle’s *metaphysics*.

The Christian faith placed so much value on thinking, reasoning and communication through words, that the first title of the Gospel of John uses for Jesus Christ is *The Word*—not just the words He said, but that He was the Word of God to humankind.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Enlightenment (and I would distinguish here between the Anglo Enlightenment and the French Enlightenment) produced what we now know as democratic freedom and high intellectual aspirations—how? By emphasizing the difficulties of communication, and the impossibility of inter-cultural understanding? No, such an emphasis would have caused the Enlightenment to be stillborn. Instead, the Enlightenment resulted from the confidence that we could, through the use of reason and

language, come to understand a large measure of what is true about the human condition, and find and enjoy increasing

wisdom, goodness and beauty through the use of words.

For example, this bringing together of reason and faith gave us the hymns of Charles Wesley and the sermons of John Wesley. There can be no conflict between faith and reason; all truths are one because of God, the source and end of all truth, is one.

Deconstruction is destructive because it is anti-intellectual—it stops thought. Searching for the good, the true, and the beautiful is hard work—it requires study and analysis and going beyond myself, not just expressing myself and my opinions. In the first decade of the last century G. K. Chesterton gave a prophetic warning in his book *Orthodoxy*, “the whole modern

world is at war with reason, and the tower already reels. The peril is that the human intellect is free to destroy itself. One set of thinkers can in some degree prevent further thinking by teaching the next generation that there is no validity in any human thought. There is the ultimate evil.”<sup>33</sup> (It’s rather frightening to think that Chesterton saw

decisions for the common good. We can decide on better and best. We can evaluate between choices. Not all answers are equal. (My daughter’s high school history teacher introduced his course by holding up his book and saying, “This text has meaning. And I’ve got news for you—you can be wrong.”)

Such analysis is the way forward,

Antrobus’s books did survive. And, Wilder’s message is, that even though “every good and excellent thing in the world stands moment by moment on the razor-edge of danger and must be fought for”<sup>34</sup> we still survive—by the skin of our teeth—if we save our books—and the stories they tell.

*The resources are on the shelves in your own libraries—perhaps not the answers, at least not all the answers—but the tools to find the answers.*

that almost a century ago—what would he say today?)

If we, however unwittingly, fall into this trap of believing that truth cannot be found, then we will stop looking—stop thinking—and be left only with feeling. In past ages philosophers disagreed on many things, but they agreed on the desirability of seeking truth and on the method—that through reason and discussion we could achieve a greater understanding. In the past when thinkers hit a dead end they kept looking and came up with answers that the next generation could build on.

So must we continue the dialogue if we are to keep the flame of meaningful communication alight. Let me suggest principles by which we can move forward.

We can seek to understand the nature of God—through studying His Word and observing the creation He spoke into being—and from that gain insights into the nature of humankind.

We can focus on the great commonalities and seek to understand and expand what we do know. From there we can work on our differences.

We can observe the consequences which different ideas and different ways of living have had for others. We can examine traditions to ascertain why certain ideas and practices have become traditional and cling to and build upon what is good.

We can reach some working hypotheses about much of what is true, what is good, and what is beautiful, and what is wise. Society can reach

and the resources are on the shelves in your own libraries—perhaps not the answers, at least not all the answers—but the tools to find the answers if we work together.

Unfortunately, this New Enlightenment may be harder to bring about than we realize at first glance. Perhaps even the need for it is difficult to recognize. It may be that even in a college library no patron has ever engaged you in a discussion of Postmodern Deconstructionism. Yet how often do you hear the very heart of such thinking? “Whose truth?” Usually followed by, “Well, that’s all right for you. I have my own reality.” All such bumper sticker slogans that pass for thinking stop discussion and reasoning.

As Keepers of the Light we must be prepared to challenge such thinking. Our shelves must be stocked with books, journals, and tapes that promote confidence in reason and equip our readers to engage in battle for the light. And I firmly believe that such books are the key.

One of my favorite scenes in all of literature is in Thornton Wilder’s play, “The Skin of Our Teeth.” After the descent of the ice age, the Noahic flood and the great holocaust, George Antrobus, the hero returns to cry, “My books! They haven’t been lost, have they?... Remember, Maggie, we almost lost them once before? And when we finally did collect a few torn copies... they as good as rebuilt the world... They had voices to guide us; and the memory of our mistakes to warn us.”

#### KEEPING STORY ALIGHT

More than in any other way, it is through story that we understand ourselves and that we decide what is important and meaningful about who, where, when, and why we are. Throughout recorded history, people in various cultures have had their meta-narratives which provided for them their story. They are a part of all of us because those meta-narratives had a great deal in common from one culture to another.

The epic stories of all times—The Iliad and The Odyssey, The edda, The Song of Roland, Beowulf, the Arthurian Legends—communicate to us in our culture a large measure of what provided meaning and purpose to those peoples—people who had no idea that they would one day be considered part of what is now looked at, and often derided, as Western Culture. Inevitably there are nuances and details we are likely to miss because of the differences between our context and theirs, but surely we should not give up and discard those stories, just because we may not be able to internalize them in precisely the same ways those cultures did.

A few years ago Madeline l’Engle delivered a paper on this theme for a colloquium at Hillsdale College. She said: “Tell me a story,” I used to beg my mother. “Tell me a story!”

“What I was asking for, and what we all ask for when we beg for stories, is an affirmation that our lives have meaning, that we are real, that we matter in the scheme of the universe. Story affirms our “is”-ness, our value, and it also affirms the value of life in a world where life seems constantly denigrated, and where meaninglessness is an epidemic illness.”

L'Engle says, "I grew up with a southern mother and a damnyankee father, and I got two very different versions of the 'wah'. It's a very different 'wah' depending on your point of view. One of the unexpected results of that terrible war, where brother fought against brother, was story. After the war the defeated southerners had nothing else left. Mostly they were women. Their husbands, brothers, lovers were dead. Their houses were burned. Their fields had been salted so crops could not be planted. All they had left was story."

You will notice that L'Engle did not say that because there are different viewpoints we cannot communicate. On the contrary, she sees that changeableness of language as one of its strengths—not a barrier to communication, but an aid to it.

She says, and I quote, "One of the marvels of story is its variableness. The same story is never the same. On a different day, in a different place, it means different things to us. Have you noticed that when a story is told over and over again some of the facts in it tend to change? When this happens, what is usually taking place is an attempt to get to the real truth of the story, not to alter the truth, but to deepen it—an attempt to get closer to the deepest truth of what has happened. Truth breaks through the restrictions of fact and helps to answer our deepest questions, the questions we are really asking when we cry, 'tell me a story.'"<sup>5</sup>

If we let our stories—Cuchulain, Sampson, King Arthur—"dwindle and die," then, Madeline L'Engle says, "that is a kind of death for us as human beings." To deny the existence of a valid meta-narrative, as deconstructionists do, is to deny that we can learn from literature.

### GUARDING THE FLAME OF WORSHIP

Historians on the other side of the dark may well look back to our time and date the beginning of the second Dark Age at 1895. That year Fredrich Nietzsche declared himself to be the

Antichrist. He wrote the book *Anti-christ* and set out to destroy Christianity. The record shows that Nietzsche died in 1900. But his philosophy, like the prophesied Antichrist, did not die. His beliefs that no truth exists, that morals are artificial constructs, that the individual has no value, that all that counts is power and pleasure are alive and well today.

Adolph Hitler, World War II, the elimination of "Western Civ." from university core curricula, sex and violence in movies and on TV, prohibitions against prayer in schools and graduation ceremonies, abortion, euthanasia, dumbed-down church services—all are the direct result of Nietzsche's philosophy that truth neither exists nor matters.

The church did not refute Nietzsche. His ideas took over in the academy, blossoming into power in the 1960's, so that a recent Gallup poll reported that 85 percent of the American populations believe that "values are something that each must decide for oneself," and an even higher percentage agree that "What is true for me is not necessarily true for others."

Nietzsche has won.

Now, this is not the truth I would have us set ourselves to guard, but it is where we must begin in our understanding if we would turn the tide of deconstruction and relativism around us. And the desperate fact is that, for the most part, the church long ago gave up trying to compete in the arena of ideas. For many decades the effects of leaving the battle for men's minds to the enemy weren't obvious because we retained a societal memory of belief. Now even that has faded. Now we are paying the price. Now we are not dealing with a society full of lapsed Christians. We are dealing with a society of non-believers. "Never-believers."

And how do we, as guardians of the truth, respond? Well, by quoting Scripture and by talking about how Jesus makes us feel. Speaking English to a person who knows only French will get us nowhere. And yet that is what

we are doing. The day is past when we can begin the work of evangelism by proclaiming Christ and a Christian God.

Before we can present the gospel in a way that will reach most of the western world we must engage in a through-going program of pre-evangelism. Whether we are selecting books to equip Christians or recommending reading to reach the secular world directly, this is an issue we all need to address. Our approaches will be different depending on our audience, but we must be aware that all our readers are now living in the post-modern—post-Christian—world—a world which rejects the right of anyone to proclaim anything as True.

But that's not the worst of it. As with the galeforces that would extinguish the flame of meaningful communication, the greatest threat to the flame of worship and belief comes not from outside forces, but from within. The worst news is that the Church has bought into this relativism. The Christian Church has lost the confidence to proclaim the Truth forcefully. This relativism hit the mainline churches first. It came out as Social Gospel 40 years ago. Now, when many of those denominations are experiencing renewal, it's rampant in evangelical churches as "needs-based evangelism"—making God popular rather than telling His truth. Instead of taking God's ideas into the world, we're taking the world's ideas into the church.

We are dropping off our distinctive beliefs and the ancient practices of worship that have stood strong to repel barbarian invaders for 2000 years and present only a generic experience of love and goo-feeling. We no longer talk about the things Christians should know and believe. Why? Because such beliefs might offend someone. Because they may be hard to defend. Because we aren't sure they will stand up in a relativistic environment.

"Jesus love you" is valid doctrine. But if we don't go beyond that we've planted only shallow seed that the enemy will sneak in and pull up.

By buying into postmodern relativism Christians have lost the confidence to proclaim what is wrong with our world. Christianity is a gospel of Love. But sin exists. Evil exists. Satan is real. And Satanic evil must be combated with more than a fuzzy, hand-clapping experience. We need the strong affirmations of the historic creeds. We need to partake regularly of the sacraments Christ ordained. We need the strengthening of His presence if we are going to stand strong against the challenges we will face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We must get back to the basics Christians have always held in common. We have relativized the Christian experience to the point that it is no longer built on shared beliefs, but rather on individual experience. "However you experience God is O.K – even if it includes specifically unbiblical practices." This is not Christian. This is New Age.

And as if I weren't in enough trouble already, I'm going to give you an example of how the church has bought into this relativism – the most obvious, most volatile example: We no longer teach truth in our music. The great hymns were deeply theological. We have largely thrown them out for music that is an expression of personal experience and feeling. Rather than proclaiming the nature of God and His actions in the world we now focus on "my response," "my desires," "my feelings".

This is not just a matter of "style" or of the age of the composers or worshipper. Many of contemporary composer Graham Kendrick's hymns are worthy to stand beside those of Charles Wesley. It's a matter of proclaiming the Truth. We are dumbing down our worship, dumbing down our music, dumbing down our message, dumbing down the books in our libraries. We are cheapening God's grace and Christ's death on the cross.

Tony Evans, author of *Returning to Your First Love*, says that our churches are full of carnal Christians. He calls them ABC Christians. Evans says,

"Most of us would be insulted if someone gave us a book that started out, 'A is for Apple. Apple is a fruit that grows on trees.' Then, 'C is for cup.' You get the idea." But many Christians are stalled at this level.

These carnal Christians, Evans says, "still measure the success of their spiritual life by how well they were entertained, not by how much truth they were exposed to."<sup>7</sup> And they evaluate books the same way.

We need to include the great Christian creeds and truths, timeless worship practices and the best music of the faith in our worship, and we need to offer Christian classics and books that proclaim the truths of the faith in our libraries.

Unless God is timeless and unchanging, and unless His truth and beauty transcend momentary fashions, He is not worthy of our worship. If our worship of Him and reading and writing about Him do not speak of those eternal characteristics, it is not worth doing. If our "worship" of God is really only testimony to our transient religious pleasures, it implicitly testifies that our God is Transient, small, and unworthy of the attention of the non-Christian observer.

As Richard John Neuhaus has said, we must not "debase the beautiful, trim the true, or detach the good from the uncomfortable demands of the Gospel."

God is the God of great ideas or He is no God at all. Our work must testify

to Him as the source of all that is great, true, good and beautiful, rather than to our feelings and responses to Him.

John Wesley held to a quadrilateral to help us arrive at the Truth: Scripture, Reason, Tradition, Experience – in that order, but easier to remember if you reorder them in the REST acronym. But

however you order them, the Wesleyan quadrilateral is rapidly becoming today's generic Christian "unilateral". We long ago largely gave up on reason. Most of our churches regard tradition (anything older than 20 years ago at most – including orthodox Christian credal statements) as no longer "significant" (the hubris of thinking we don't need to know what centuries of Christians have learned before us). Finally, and most frightening, we lighten up on Scripture in favor of psychology. But we're really big on experience. Relativistic, individualistic, experience. I'm OK, you're OK as long as we can feel good about God together. No. I'm not OK, you're not OK. We are fallen people living in a fallen world. We desperately need to have the image of God restored in us and in our world. We need to be praying daily – if not hourly – to a holy God that His will might be done on earth as completely as it is done in heaven.

Have the flames in our lighthouses dimmed so that we have lost sight of this truth? Are we losing the battle for minds because we are no longer fighting? If that's the problem, what can we do about it?

First, we cannot announce. We must convince. John Wesley said the first work of grace is to convince the mind. The heart cannot receive what

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the mind cannot believe. Those of us called to supply our community with books need to prepare ourselves and the shelves of our libraries in the context of a world where we have to start from zero. Remember, we are not living in a society that has fallen away from the faith. We are living in a

society that believes there is nothing in which to have faith. We must equip our patrons to reach people's minds. We need books, articles, curricula focused not on felt needs but rather on the reality of God and the reality of His Truth.

The task is enormous. But – don't panic – we don't have to think up all the answers for ourselves. The resources are there. The great thinkers and writers of the past – and of today – are there, offering their shoulders for us to stand on. For example, let me mention just four books that can equip the readers you serve to take a stand for the existence of objective truth:

1. Let's start with Thomas Aquinas who wrote his *Summa Theologica* in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In this he shows that belief in God is fully reasonable. More, it is entirely unreasonable not to believe in God. One who denies the existence of God must be prepared to say, among other things, that an infinite chain of causes is conceivable without an uncaused first cause; that something can come from absolutely nothing; and that the marvelous workings of the human brain, as one example, can occur through blind chance without intelligent design. Now the original *Summa* is extremely heavy-going, but there are several versions available that make Aquinas accessible to modern readers. I have listed some in my hand-out.

2. Then, from the sheer logic of Aquinas, we can turn to *Orthodoxy* where G.K. Chesterton takes a more intuitive and humorous approach. Chesterton formulated a utopia – designed his own "social paradise" and then sought the philosophy or religious system that could best lead to his stated utopian ideals. And Chesterton recounts how he, "with the utmost daring," discovered what had been discovered before – orthodox Christianity, as summarized in the

Apostle's Creed.

3. Probably best known to most of us, C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* which leads readers in a few clear steps to reason their way to the existence of a Higher Being, and from there on to the Christian God, beginning with the fact that people have an inbred sense of fairness, of justice – at least as they would have it applied to themselves. Lewis says this is the moral law – a real law that is beyond the ordinary facts of man's behavior, which none of us made, but presses on all of us. And there is Something or Someone behind that moral law.

4. And, in *The God Who Is There*, Francis Schaeffer declares over and over that "knowledge precedes faith" and tells his readers how to begin with the truth of the world and the truth of what man is like to lead others on to Christian Truth.

Well, that's just a sampling – a few grains of the bountiful supply of resources available to equip us as we sail forward to take up the battle for minds. As keepers of the light, our job is to have such resources available and to encourage our readers to launch into the deep. We aren't here to entertain or to baby-sit. We are here to fight the dark with powerful ideas that make the Truth accessible to a world that doesn't believe right or wrong exists.

I challenge you to stock your shelves with books that tell timeless stories and that teach strong themes of truth. Then urge your readers to try them. Our milk-fed readers need to be urged to stronger meat.

I ask you to join me in this great challenge to hold back the dark. Sometimes we look around and the task seems overwhelming. But, if there is anything that twenty years of writing about history has taught me, it is that it has been darker many times in the past. And each time the light has won because men and women stood strong for the truth. So let us join those

guardians of the truth who have gone before us and keep the flame burning bright in our lighthouses.

As we sail into the Twenty-First Century, we must realize that postmodernism will not be the final word. Our challenge is to prepare those we influence to build the word of truth and to worship in truth on the other side of the dark in the post-Postmodern age. †

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<sup>1</sup> Neuhaus, Richard John, "The Public Square," *First Things*, February 1997, no. 70, p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> Twain, Mark, *The Devil's Race-Track*, "The Enchanted Sea-Wilderness," (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Chesterton, G.K., *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, "Orthodoxy," (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p. 236.

<sup>4</sup> Wilder, Thornton, *Three Plays*, "The Skin of Our Teeth," (New York: Avon Books, 1957), pp. 135,136.

<sup>5</sup> L'Engle, Madeline, "Tell Me A Story," lecture at symposium on "Timeless Truths for a Modern World," Center for Constructive Alternatives, Hillsdale College, Hillsdale, Michigan, Fall 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Evans, Tony, *Returning to Your First Love: Putting God Back in First Place*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), pp. 24-25.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, C.S., *Mere Christianity*, (New York: Collier Books, 1952), p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> Schaeffer, Francis A., *The God Who Is There*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1968), p. 142.