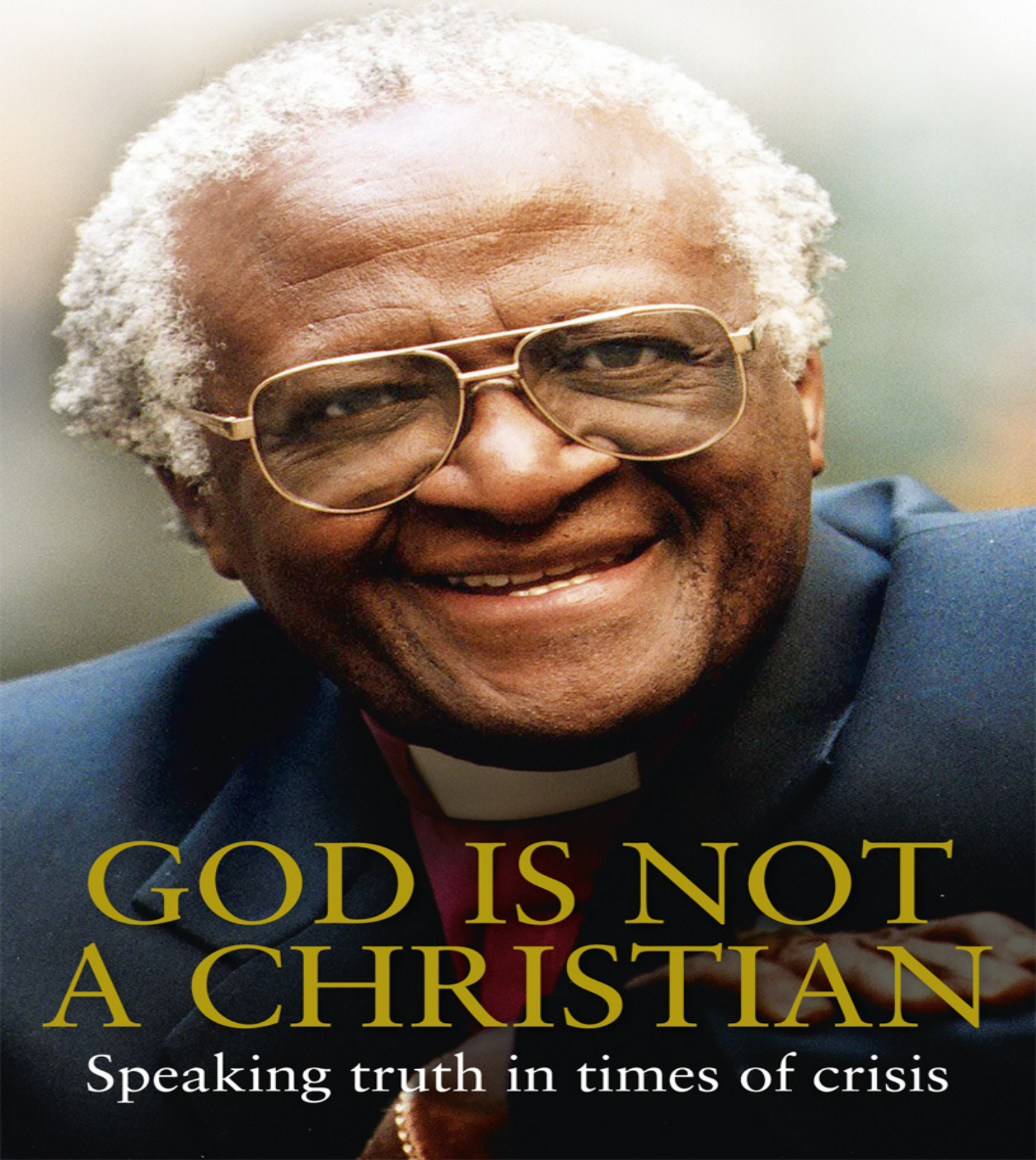
DESMOND TUTU



GOD IS NOT A CHRISTIAN

Speaking truth in times of crisis

Contents

About the Book

Archbishop Desmond Tutu is no stranger to controversy. From racism and social injustice, to managing the threat of AIDS, the continuing crisis in the Middle East and the importance of ’ubuntu’ (the concept of shared humanity), the Archbishop expresses his views powerfully and honestly, showing how faith and politics are inextricably linked in these difficult times.

In this important new book, Desmond Tutu shares his thoughts on a wide range of topical subjects, such as forgiveness and justice, the importance of community, tolerance and respect, hope and human rights, the challenges of sexuality, theology and race. There are highlights from his addresses to political rallies and church congregations, his speeches, lectures and articles, even his correspondence with the likes of President Botha.

An accompanying commentary by John Allen, who has worked closely with Desmond Tutu for many years, explains the historical context and continuing relevance of the Archbishop’s words. Capturing over three decades of the extraordinary man’s life and career, *God is Not a Christian* is a powerful reminder of precisely why Desmond Tutu is regarded as one of the best-loved and most outspoken activists for peace in the world today.

About the Authors

The first black Archbishop of Cape Town, Tutu has won the Nobel Peace Prize for his leadership of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and today is Chair of a group of former world leaders, The Elders, which aims to tackle some of the world’s most intractable problems. He has helped calm the political crisis in Kenya and regularly speaks out against Mugabe, Israel, the Iraq War and the Burmese junta, but is also noted for his irrepressible sense of humour and deep spirituality. He lives in South Africa but travels widely.

Working first as a journalist in South Africa, and then as Tutu's Press Secretary, John Allen was invited to join the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as Director of Communications in 1995. Next he was aide to Tutu when the Archbishop taught in Atlanta for two years. He lives in South Africa.

Also by Desmond Tutu

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An African Prayer Book

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No Future Without Forgiveness

Rainbow People of God

Crying in the Wilderness

Hope and Suffering

God Is Not a Christian

Speaking truth in times of crisis

Desmond Mpilo Tutu

Edited by John Allen

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Foreword

SOME OF MY friends are skeptical when they hear me say this, but I am by nature a person who dislikes confrontation. I have consciously sought during my life to emulate my mother, whom our family knew as a gentle "comforter of the afflicted." However, when I see innocent people suffering, pushed around by the rich and the powerful, then, as the prophet Jeremiah says, if I try to keep quiet it is as if the word of God burned like a fire in my breast. I feel compelled to speak out, sometimes even to argue with God over how a loving creator can allow this to happen.

When I recently announced my retirement from public life, I said I wanted to slow down and spend more time reading and writing, praying and thinking, and being with my family. I also said that, apart from continuing some of my activities as a Nobel Peace laureate, I would adopt a lower public profile and no longer give interviews to journalists.

Reflecting on this collection of what I have said and written over the past forty years has shown me how difficult it is going to be for me to shut up (and reminded me how sexist my language was when I was young!). For as I see and read about the suffering, the pain, and the conflict that God's people still undergo, their experiences cry out for the passionate involvement of people of faith in advocating for the values of God's kingdom.

Yet no one is indispensable, least of all me, and what gives me hope and reassurance as I approach my eightieth birthday is the remarkable passion for justice and peace that I have experienced when meeting and speaking to thousands of young people around the world in these first years of the twenty-first century. When I see their level of commitment, I know that the world is in safe hands.

In the Church of Sant'Egidio in Rome, home of an extraordinary community of laypeople devoted to working for the poor, there is an old crucifix that portrays Christ without arms. When I asked about its importance to the community, I was told that it shows how God relies on us to do God's work in the world.

Without us, God has no eyes; without us, God has no ears; without us, God has no arms or hands. God relies on us. Won't you join other people of faith in becoming God's partners in the world?

—Desmond Tutu, April 2011

Editor's Preface

IF THE REASONS for Desmond Tutu becoming one of the world's most prominent advocates of faith-based social justice and religious tolerance could be reduced to a single, succinct statement, it would be this: his fierce and uncompromising determination to tell the truth as he sees it.

In the early years of his public life, his courage in speaking out, angrily and fearlessly, against apartheid at a time when most of South Africa's political leaders were in jail, exiled or banished, or facing torture and assassination made him a hero in the eyes of most black South Africans. But, as Nelson Mandela would later write, it also made him "public enemy number one" to most whites—the reviled subject of death threats and even, it became clear later, serious attempts on his life.

That changed after the release of Mandela and the transition to democracy, when Tutu became as watchful a critic of his friends and erstwhile allies in the struggle against apartheid as he had been of their predecessors in government. At the same time, he used his anti-apartheid credentials to broaden his campaign for justice and human rights to Africa and the world, in situations of political injustice and oppression ranging from Marxist Ethiopia and Western-aligned Zaire to the Middle East and Panama under military rule.

He did not stop there: the values underlying his advocacy—drawn from his faith and the vision of a shared humanity held out by the African spirit of *ubuntu* ("a person is a person only through other persons")—led him to become a campaigner against intolerance in general, speaking out for interfaith understanding and cooperation, and against religious fundamentalism and the persecution of minorities such as gays and lesbians. His outspokenness and his readiness to voice what appeared on the surface to be heresy have made him both an admired icon and a lightning rod for controversy—a man who could be acclaimed the hero of a crowd on one day and be forced to remonstrate with a murderous mob on another.

Watching him exercise his ministry over the course of thirty-five years, whether in the streets and stadiums of South Africa—rallying people's morale with stirring rhetoric, channeling anger in creative directions, and defusing violence—or in closed meetings with dictators, Western leaders, or Zionists angry at his identification with the Palestinians, I came to see that it is when he is faced with the toughest, most challenging situations that he is at his best. It is when he is called upon to deliver his most unpopular messages—sometimes to his opponents, at other times to his supporters—that he articulates his values, his ideals, and his faith most powerfully and persuasively.

I hope that this collection will reflect this face of Desmond Tutu. As a series of texts reflecting a life in action rather than the ruminations of a scholar, it comprises a disparate range of material: off-the-cuff interventions, answers to journalists' questions, letters, and both abbreviated and lengthy excerpts from speeches, sermons, and other writings, condensed and edited for clarity where necessary.

—John Allen

God bless our world

Guard our children

Guide our leaders

And give us peace

For Jesus Christ's sake.

Amen

—Adapted by Desmond Tutu from a prayer by Trevor Huddleston

PART ONE

Advocate of Tolerance and Respect

Chapter 1

God Is Clearly Not a Christian

Pleas for Interfaith Tolerance

Nothing epitomizes Desmond Tutu's radicalism (using the word radical, *as he likes to say, in the original sense of getting to the root of an issue) more than his views on the relationship of his faith to the faiths of others. This chapter combines remarks he made over four occasions, revealing a refreshing, inspiring, and, yes, radical perspective that has become particularly pertinent to the post-9/11 world.*

1

This is an excerpt from a sermon preached at St. Martin in the Fields Church on Trafalgar Square, London, during a meeting of leaders of the world's Anglican churches after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, drawing on the Christian scriptures as the basis of his approach.[1]

ISN'T IT NOTEWORTHY in the parable of the Good Samaritan that Jesus does not give a straightforward answer to the question "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). Surely he could have provided a catalogue of those whom the scribe could love as himself as the law required. He does not. Instead, he tells a story. It is as if Jesus wanted among other things to point out that life is a bit more complex; it has too many ambivalences and ambiguities to allow always for a straightforward and simplistic answer.

This is a great mercy, because in times such as our own —times of change when many familiar landmarks have shifted or disappeared—people are bewildered; they hanker after unambiguous, straightforward answers. We appear to be scared of diversity in ethnicities, in religious faiths, in political and ideological points of view. We have an impatience with anything and anyone that suggests there might just be another perspective, another way of looking at the same thing, another answer worth exploring. There is a nostalgia for the security in the womb of a safe sameness, and so we shut out the stranger and the alien; we look for security in those who can provide answers that must be unassailable because no one is permitted to dissent, to question. There is a longing for the homogeneous and an allergy against the different, the other.

Now Jesus seems to say to the scribe, "Hey, life is more exhilarating as you try to work out the implications of your faith rather than living by rote, with ready-made second-hand answers, fitting an unchanging paradigm to a shifting, changing, perplexing, and yet fascinating world." Our faith, our knowledge that God is in charge, must make us ready to take risks, to be venturesome and innovative; yes, to dare to walk where angels might fear to tread.

2

This talk also comes from a forum in Britain, where Tutu addressed leaders of different faiths during a mission to the city of Birmingham in 1989.

THEY TELL THE story of a drunk who crossed the street and accosted a pedestrian, asking him, “I shay, which ish the other shide of the shtreet?” The pedestrian, somewhat nonplussed, replied, “*That* side, of course!” The drunk said, “Shtrange. When I wash on that shide, they shaid it wash thish shide.” Where the other side of the street is depends on where *we* are. Our perspective differs with our context, the things that have helped to form us; and religion is one of the most potent of these formative influences, helping to determine how and what we apprehend of reality and how we operate in our own specific context.

My first point seems overwhelmingly simple: that the accidents of birth and geography determine to a very large extent to what faith we belong. The chances are very great that if you were born in Pakistan you are a Muslim, or a Hindu if you happened to be born in India, or a Shintoist if it is Japan, and a Christian if you were born in Italy. I don’t know what significant fact can be drawn from this—perhaps that we should not succumb too easily to the temptation to exclusiveness and dogmatic claims to a monopoly of the truth of our particular faith. You could so easily have been an adherent of the faith that you are now denigrating, but for the fact that you were born here rather than there.

My second point is this: not to insult the adherents of other faiths by suggesting, as sometimes has happened, that for instance when you are a Christian the adherents of other faiths are really Christians without knowing it. We

must acknowledge them for who they are in all their integrity, with their conscientiously held beliefs; we must welcome them and respect them as who they are and walk reverently on what is their holy ground, taking off our shoes, metaphorically and literally. We must hold to our particular and peculiar beliefs tenaciously, not pretending that all religions are the same, for they are patently not the same. We must be ready to learn from one another, not claiming that we alone possess all truth and that somehow we have a corner on God.

We should in humility and joyfulness acknowledge that the supernatural and divine reality we all worship in some form or other transcends all our particular categories of thought and imagining, and that because the divine—however named, however apprehended or conceived—is infinite and we are forever finite, we shall never comprehend the divine completely. So we should seek to share all insights we can and be ready to learn, for instance, from the techniques of the spiritual life that are available in religions other than our own. It is interesting that most religions have a transcendent reference point, a *mysterium tremendum*, that comes to be known by deigning to reveal itself, himself, herself, to humanity; that the transcendent reality is compassionate and concerned; that human beings are creatures of this supreme, supra-mundane reality in some way, with a high destiny that hopes for an everlasting life lived in close association with the divine, either as absorbed without distinction between creature and creator, between the divine and human, or in a wonderful intimacy which still retains the distinctions between these two orders of reality.

When we read the classics of the various religions in matters of prayer, meditation, and mysticism, we find substantial convergence, and that is something to rejoice at. We have enough that conspires to separate us; let us

celebrate that which unites us, that which we share in common.

Surely it is good to know that God (in the Christian tradition) created us all (not just Christians) in his image, thus investing us all with infinite worth, and that it was with all humankind that God entered into a covenant relationship, depicted in the covenant with Noah when God promised he would not destroy his creation again with water. Surely we can rejoice that the eternal word, the Logos of God, enlightens everyone—not just Christians, but everyone who comes into the world; that what we call the Spirit of God is not a Christian preserve, for the Spirit of God existed long before there were Christians, inspiring and nurturing women and men in the ways of holiness, bringing them to fruition, bringing to fruition what was best in all.

We do scant justice and honor to our God if we want, for instance, to deny that Mahatma Gandhi was a truly great soul, a holy man who walked closely with God. Our God would be too small if he was not also the God of Gandhi: if God is *one*, as we believe, then he is the *only* God of all his people, whether they acknowledge him as such or not. God does not need us to protect him. Many of us perhaps need to have our notion of God deepened and expanded. It is often said, half in jest, that God created man in his own image and man has returned the compliment, saddling God with his own narrow prejudices and exclusivity, foibles and temperamental quirks. God remains God, whether God has worshippers or not.

This mission in Birmingham to which I have been invited is a Christian celebration, and we will make our claims for Christ as unique and as the Savior of the world, hoping that we will live out our beliefs in such a way that they help to commend our faith effectively. Our conduct far too often contradicts our profession, however. We are supposed to proclaim the God of love, but we have been guilty as

Christians of sowing hatred and suspicion; we commend the one whom we call the Prince of Peace, and yet as Christians we have fought more wars than we care to remember. We have claimed to be a fellowship of compassion and caring and sharing, but as Christians we often sanctify sociopolitical systems that belie this, where the rich grow ever richer and the poor grow ever poorer, where we seem to sanctify a furious competitiveness, ruthless as can only be appropriate to the jungle.

3

Tutu's most detailed theological argument for interfaith tolerance was made to fellow Christians in a 1992 lecture in memory of the Roman Catholic archbishop of Cape Town, Stephen Naidoo, with whom Tutu had worked closely in defusing conflict in the city in the 1980s.

MOST CHRISTIANS BELIEVE that they get their mandate for exclusivist claims from the Bible. Jesus does say that no one can come to the Father except through him, and in Acts we hear it proclaimed that there is no other name under heaven that is given for salvation (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). Those passages seem to be categorical enough to make all debate superfluous. But is this *all* that the Bible says, with nothing, as it were, on the side of inclusiveness and universality, and does the exclusivist case seem reasonable in the light of human history and development?

Fortunately for those who contend that Christianity does not have an exclusive and proprietary claim on God, as if God were indeed a Christian, there is ample biblical evidence to support their case. John's Gospel, in which Jesus claims to be the exclusive means of access to the Father, right at the beginning makes an even more cosmic

and startling claim for Jesus, as the Light who enlightens *everyone*, not just Christians (John 1:9). In Romans, St. Paul points out that everyone stands condemned as under sin before God—both Jew and Gentile (Romans 3:9). This, which is central to the teaching he intends to convey, is found in an Epistle focused on the wonder of God's free acquittal of all. God's grace, bestowed freely through Jesus Christ, would be untenable if there were no universality about sin. Sin involves, in Paul's view, the deliberate contravention of God's law. There is no problem about the Jew who has received the Torah and constantly infringes it. But what is the case with regard to the Gentile, the pagan who seems to be bereft of a divine law which he could break and so stand justly under divine judgment? If he has received no law, then he patently cannot be adjudged in the wrong before God. Paul then declares that the Gentile too has received the law which resides in his conscience (Romans 2:15). Every one of God's human creatures has the capacity to know something about God from the evidence God leaves in his handiwork (Romans 1:18–20); this is the basis for natural theology and natural law. Immanuel Kant spoke about the categorical imperative. All human creatures have a sense that some things ought to be done just as others ought not to be done. This is a universal phenomenon—what varies is the content of the natural law. Paul and Barnabas invoke the same principles in their discourse at Lystra, where they were thought to be divinities (Acts 14:15–17). In his speech before the Areopagus, Paul speaks about how God has created all human beings from one stock and given everyone the urge, the hunger, for divine things so that all will seek after God and perhaps find him, adding that God is not far from us since all (not just Christians) live and move and have their being in him (Acts 17:22–31). Talking to pagans, Paul declares that all are God's offspring.

An important hermeneutical principle calls us not to take Bible texts in isolation and out of context, but to use the Bible to interpret the Bible, thus helping to ensure that our interpretation is read *out* of the Bible in exegesis and not read *into* the Bible with our peculiar biases. A related principle calls us to ask whether what we are saying is consistent with the revelation that God has given of himself finally and fully (as Christians believe) in Jesus Christ.

What I have tried to say here is that the text "No one can come to the Father but by me" need not be interpreted to refer only to the incarnate Logos, for there was also the preexistent Logos, as the Gospel of John attests (John 1:1). This would then mean that the preincarnate Logos would lead people to the knowledge of God, a revelatory activity that antedates Christianity. Does not Hebrews assert that God in sundry times and in diverse manners spoke to the fathers in the past through the prophets (Hebrews 1:1)?

If this is not the case, we must ask some further awkward questions. Whose divine writ runs where that of the Christian God does not run? What is then the fate of those who lived before Jesus was born on earth? Were they totally devoid of knowledge of God? How could they be blamed for something about which they could do nothing? How could they have been expected to have knowledge of God through Jesus Christ long before Jesus Christ existed? Jesus himself holds the Law and Prophets—that portion of the Bible we call the Old Testament—as authoritative; that is, as revealing in certain respects the will of God, as when Jesus appeals to the creation narrative about the indissolubility of marriage (Matthew 19:3–6). He quotes it with approval when he exhorts those who are pharisaical in their call for external religious observances to discover what the text "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" means (Matthew 12:7). How could those who predated Jesus Christ have come to the knowledge of God as is now attested to by their acquaintance with the divine will unless