The Apostle Paul lived in a pluralistic society. His own people worshipped the one God, the God of Abraham, and obeyed the Mosaic Law. The majority of people in the Mediterranean world prayed to the gods of Greece and Rome. Many venerated their ancestors while all were commanded to worship the Emperor. Many also followed foreign cults and mystery religions. Paul was called to preach the gospel to people of every nation (Acts 9:15), and what he wrote in the first eight chapters of Romans makes it abundantly clear why he was convinced of the universal relevance of the gospel. Since all have sinned and stand under the judgment of God, it follows logically that all need a savior. This was the good news that Paul sought to share wherever he went, but he was constantly confronted with the challenges of witnessing in a pluralistic society. The Roman authorities viewed his preaching as a threat to emperor worship. The Ephesians saw it as an insult to the goddess Diana. The Greeks thought the good news he proclaimed was nonsense. And the Jews saw it as a heretical rejection of their ancient religion.

In Romans 9–11 Paul addresses the topic of Christian witness in a multi-faith society. He does so with specific reference to the Jewish religion, but his approach to the Jewish question provides a model for Christian witness to any religious or cultural group, whether in the first century or the twenty-first.

**Respect for the religious tradition and devotion of others**

First, it is evident that Paul had great affection and respect for the Jewish people. They were his people, his family, his friends, whom he knew and loved. He knew how this people had been singularly blessed by God. He respected, cherished, and valued their religious heritage. He recognized how important it was for them.

Paul knew how much they had received from God. God had made them his people, shown them his glory, given them his law, and taught them how they should worship him. He had given them innumerable promises of blessing, a multitude of great spiritual leaders, and, in the fullness of time, he had sent his Son to be their Messiah. Paul appreciated this wonderful religious heritage which he shared with them. He too was a Jew, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. While Paul had common ground to build on in his communication with Jews, he tried a similar approach to other peoples in so far as it was possible. He tried to show that he understood and appreciated their religious traditions. He often began his preaching from a point of mutual understanding. When speaking to polytheists in Lystra, he refers to the great Creator God (Acts 14:15). When addressing Greek intellectuals in Athens, he quotes from their philosophers and poets (Acts 17:22–31). He looked for common ground, for points of agreement, for aspects of a culture that he could respect and admire. That is as evident in his letters as it is in his preaching. In every culture and ethnic group there is much that is fine and honourable, customs that show respect, ethical understanding that encourages morality, and spiritual understanding about the importance of prayer or the character of God. So far as was possible, Paul always showed respect and appreciation for the culture and heritage of the people to whom he spoke. His approach was as positive as possible.

In our witness to our pluralistic world, we need to start by looking as positively as we can at the beliefs and culture of others. We must do this because we can’t respect people unless...
In every culture and ethnic group there is much that is fine and honourable, customs that show respect, ethical understanding that encourages morality, and spiritual understanding about the importance of prayer or the character of God. So far as was possible, Paul always showed respect and appreciation for the culture and heritage of the people to whom he spoke.

First, he speaks of the necessity of the gospel (10:1–5). While he respected the Jewish religious tradition and the sincere devotion of many Jewish people, he recognized that they were trying to establish their own credibility with God and assert their own goodness. But Paul was convinced that no one could do that. No one could earn enough credit to gain a place in heaven. “Believe me,” says Paul, “I tried. I know it’s impossible to make the grade. You can never earn righteousness as a reward. You can only receive it as a gift. That’s why Jesus came and died.”

Paul also spells out the simplicity of the gospel (10:6–10). Here is the wonderful truth that he sought to share with everyone he met. You don’t have to do the impossible, he argues. You don’t have to climb to heaven. You don’t have to act as if Christ had never been born and the Son of God had never come down to this earth. You don’t have to find your way up to God because he has come down. You don’t have to build up your own reservoir of credits. You don’t have to compensate with hard cash for every mistake you have made. You don’t have to collect points until you have earned enough to get a free pass into heaven.

You don’t have to act as if Christ was still in the grave and the work of salvation was incomplete and that you have to do something to complete it. Christ has died and now he has been raised from the dead. As Paul said earlier in 4:25, “Christ was put to death for our sins and raised for our justification.” There is nothing for anyone to do except to believe with their hearts and confess Christ with their lips (10:9).

Paul concludes by spelling out again the universal relevance of the gospel (10:11–13). Whatever a person’s racial, religious, cultural, or social background may be, the gospel is for them. The Lord is Lord of all. He bestows riches on all who call on him. The gospel is for everybody. This is a teaching that is not popular in our relativistic age. Postmodernism pervades western society, and, I fear, is creeping east along the internet. Western media extol a message of tolerance: “Let everyone have their own beliefs.” Everyone is right. Every truth is true. If a person thinks something is true, it is true for him. If someone says that the world is flat, then that is their conviction and they have every right to hold it. But the fact is that they are wrong. To allow for such thinking is relativism gone mad.

There is such a thing as absolute truth. Even if they say it a thousand times and hold it with absolute conviction, the world will never be flat. When the writer of Genesis declares that in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth he is declaring to a pluralistic age that there are not many gods but one God, and he has made all that there is in its intricacy and its interrelatedness. The biblical proclamation is always that those who believe in one God are right. Paul goes on to spell out the corollary that since there is only one God he alone can offer salvation. As Isaiah writes: “Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth, for I am God and there is no other” (Isa 45:22). As Christians, we must face the logic of our faith. If we have a Savior, he is the Savior of the world. If he is not the Savior of the world, then we have no Savior.

Conviction of the universal relevance of the gospel

In the opening chapter of Romans, Paul declares that he is not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first to the Jew and then for the Gentile. In chapter 10 he reiterates his conviction that this message is of the utmost relevance to the whole human race.

We understand them. And we can’t understand unless we take the time and trouble to learn and study what they believe and what is important to them. We cannot share with them unless we are first prepared to listen to them.

Paul also had a high regard for sincerity and religious devotion. In Romans 10:2, he says of the Pharisees: “I can testify that they are zealous for God.” Jesus called some of the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites. Doubtless some of them were. Doubtless today he would call some Christians hypocrites. But we should not for a moment imagine that all Pharisees were like that. Many, like Nicodemus, had a real love for the word of God and a deep desire to obey that word. Many would have known the Psalms by heart and meditated on them constantly. They were meticulous in obeying the law. They were disciplined in keeping times of prayer, and their prayer lives would put the prayer lives of most evangelicals to shame. They kept the Sabbath day and refused to use it for anything except for prayer and the study of God’s word. They honestly tried to obey the law of God. Paul admired their zeal. He had respect both for their religious heritage and for their religious devotion. If we seek to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with others, we would do well to follow Paul’s example.

Passion and perseverance in sharing the good news

Paul is passionate about the gospel and longs that everyone—both Jew and Gentile—will hear it and respond to it. We hear the burden of his heart reflected in his cry: “How shall they hear without a preacher?” (10:14). We see his deep concern expressed again and again in these chapters: “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart” (9:2). “My heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved” (10:1). He longs and prays for the salvation of his compatriots and cries for them as Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem.

Paul didn’t spend time speculating about their eternal destiny. He didn’t argue that those who were sincere
but had never heard of Christ would probably be OK. He believed there was no salvation apart from Christ. Likewise, we have no right to gamble with other people’s salvation or to theorize while people are waiting to hear. Paul longed that they would hear as soon as possible and he longed that preachers would be sent (10:14–15).

He knew it was not easy to witness in a pluralistic society. It was his common experience that many were not interested in such an amazing message. Echoing Isaiah, he complains: “Who has believed our report?” (10:16). Paul often experienced rejection and recognized that in some small way he was walking in the footsteps of his Savior, for he refers to Isaiah’s picture of the Suffering Servant. Paul knew it was hard to be a messenger of Christ or follow in the steps of the Servant King. He knew that those who were sent out as Christ’s ambassadors had to be willing to persevere. They had to be prepared for rejection, to be prepared to be vulnerable, and to be prepared to suffer. They would not always be welcomed. They would often be misunderstood.

**Witness through sacrifice and transformed lives**

Paul lived in a multi-faith, multi-cultural society. He was a theologically trained Jew and a Roman citizen who was familiar with the Greek language and culture. He was ideally placed to build cultural bridges and to communicate effectively across cultural bridges. He was appreciative of the religious and cultural background of others. He was sensitive in the way he sought to communicate in differing cultural milieu. At the same time he was convinced of the universality of the gospel and he was passionate that all should hear it. So what was his recipe for effective witness in such a context? What was his advice to those who would seek to preach Christ in such a pluralist world?

At the beginning of Romans 12, he called them to live lives of sacrifice, as Paul knew it was hard to be a messenger of Christ or follow in the footsteps of his Savior. That would be a mark of true devotion to God. Had not Jesus called them to deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow him? Paul knew from experience how hard the road of discipleship could be and he challenges any who wish to be an ambassador for Christ to realize that they are called to a life of sacrifice and service.

Paul also stressed that those who preach the gospel should demonstrate the truth of the gospel in the way they behaved. They should practice what they preached. They should declare the gospel not simply in their words, but in their lives. They were not to be like everybody else. They were not to follow the same moral codes in their personal lives or their work. They were not to have the same priorities in life as those who had no hope beyond the grave. They were to be different. They were not to be conformed to this world. They were to be transformed: “Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (12:2). That was God’s call to Israel. They were called to be different, to be holy, to be set apart, so that the nations around them would notice the difference in their lives and be drawn to worship the true God (Deut 4:5–6). Likewise, the messengers of the gospel in our pluralistic world are called to proclaim the gospel first through who they are and then through what they say. They are not to be conformed to the lifestyle and behavior patterns of those around them. They are to be transformed, and that transformation will authenticate their message.

So how will such transformation take place? That is the burning question that comes to all of us who seek to serve and witness to Christ in our pluralistic world. It will take place as our minds are renewed by our relationship with Christ, our encounter with the Spirit, and our study of the Scriptures. As we read and reflect on God’s word our worldview will change, our attitude to people will change, and our priorities will change. We will begin to think God’s thoughts after him. Such transformation will not be instantaneous. It will be much more a process than a single event. And it will take place as we spend more time in the Scriptures, walk more closely with our Savior, and keep in step with the Spirit. The fruit of such a process is that we will find greater clarity about God’s will for our lives and greater fruitfulness in our witness. We will discover that God’s plan for our lives and for our ministry in this multi-cultural world is good, pleasing, and perfect.

Though we may have had other ideas and ambitions for ourselves, nothing could be better than following God’s plan. Though we may have our own good ideas about the most effective pattern of witness in a pluralistic world, God’s will, if we pursue it, will be the best of all. That’s why we need to listen to Paul’s words again and again. “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom 12:2). And then we need to live it out and teach it in our pluralistic world. **MRT**