

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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The Resurrection and Future Judgment

Despite current appearance of the complete secularization of Western Society, religion is actually thriving.¹ This is one of those good news/bad news scenarios. Human beings are religious beings. Avoiding religion is thus impossible. But having said that we must recognize, as the acclaimed French thinker Jacques Ellul, has pointed out, that instead of the older faith of Christianity, modern man now places faith in modernity (technology and the advance of science to mention only two of the new god-substitutes).² To this, we must acknowledge that many new religious movements have emerged. Some are closely tied to mainstream Christianity but have departed in significant ways from historic Christianity with distinctives that put strong emphasis on experience (i.e., Charismatics involved in such things as 'Holy Laughter'). Others range from groups that draw directly from Eastern mysticism (Buddhism, Hinduism) to New Age Gnosticism and spirituality (Shirley MacLaine). "Religion," observes William Edgar, "is in one way quite uniform being derived from a sense of dependence on something or someone that has ultimate value. Much religion, however, has gone wrong. Instead of trusting the true God, people turn to other objects of devotion. Though extremely varied throughout the world, at heart is a universal dynamic, the paradox of knowing and yet imprisoning the truth. In other words, the essence of religion is neither ritual nor creedal formulation nor ethical code but *faith*."³ The Apostle Paul on many occasions had to deal with the question of *religion* in his travels throughout the Ancient world. In Acts 17, we find him not only preaching the Gospel but giving an *apologia* for Christianity.

I. PAUL'S VISIT TO ATHENS

Athens was the academic and cultural center of the ancient world. Its beauty was legendary—but Paul was not impressed. First and foremost, what he saw was neither the beauty nor the brilliance of the city, but its idolatry. The adjective Luke uses (KATEIDŌLOS) occurs nowhere else in the New Testament, and has not been found in any other Greek literature. Although most English versions rend it 'full of idols', the idea conveyed seems to be that the city was 'under' them. We might say that it was 'smothered with idols' or 'swamped' by them. Alternatively, since KATA words often express luxurious growth, what Paul saw was 'a veritable forest of idols'. As he was later to say, the Athenians were 'very religious'. Xenophon referred to Athens as 'one great altar, one great sacrifice'. In consequence, "there were more gods in Athens than in all the rest of the country, and the Roman satirist hardly exaggerates when he says that it was easier to find a god there than a man."⁴

- A. His Response. He immediately went about engaging the populace with the Gospel. First, in the synagogue and amongst the God-fearing Greeks and then into the market place. It was here that the Apostle came into dispute with the learned philosophers of the city.
- B. His Method. Paul was well aware of the philosophical climate of his day. Accordingly he did *not* attempt to use premises agreed upon with the philosophers, and then pursue a "neutral" method of argumentation to move them from the circle of their beliefs into the circle of his own convictions. When he disputed with the philosophers, *they* did not find any grounds for

agreement with Paul at any level of their conversations. Rather, they utterly disdained him as a “seed-picker”, a slang term (originally applied to gutter-sparrows) for a peddler of second-hand bits of pseudo-philosophy—an intellectual scavenger (v. 18). William Ramsay in his classic study on the book of Acts describes it this way, “To appreciate fully a term of social slang requires the greatest effort to sympathise with and recreate the actual life of the people who used the term. Probably the nearest and most instructive parallel in modern English life to *Spermológos* is ‘Bounder,’ allowing for the difference between England and Athens. In both there lies the idea of one who is ‘out of the swim,’ out of the inner circle, one who lacks that thorough knowledge and practice in the rules of the game that mould the whole character and make it one’s nature to act in the proper way and play the game fair. The English term might be applied to a candidate for a professorship, whose life and circumstances had lain in a different line and who wanted knowledge and familiarity with the subject; and that is the way in which St. Paul is here called a *Spermológos*, as one who aped the ways and words of philosophers.”⁵ The word of the cross was to them foolish (1 Corinthians 1:18), and in their pseudo-wisdom they knew not God (1 Corinthians 1:20-21). Hence Paul would not consent to use their verbal “wisdom” in his apologetic, lest the cross of Christ be made void (1 Corinthians 1:17).⁶

II. PAUL’S PRESUPPOSITIONAL PROCEDURE (17:22-31)

Note carefully Paul’s *manner* of addressing his listeners. He is *respectful* and *bold* but not *arrogant*. Ridicule, anger, sarcasm, insults, and name-calling do more harm than good in encounters like this. The basic content of Paul’s apologetical method can be seen in his argumentation.

- A. Paul understood that the unbeliever’s mindset and philosophy would be systemically contrary to that of the believer—that the two represent *in principle a clash of total attitude and basic presuppositions*.
- B. Paul further understood that the basic commitments of the unbeliever produced only ignorance and foolishness, allowing an effective internal critique of his hostile worldview. The *ignorance of the non-Christian’s presuppositions* should be exposed.
- C. By contrast, the Christian takes *revelational authority* as his *starting point and controlling factor* in all reasoning. Upon the platform of God’s revealed truth, the believer can authoritatively declare the riches of God’s special revelation (the Bible) to unbelievers.
- D. Paul in Romans 1:18-34 also establishes that, because all men have a clear knowledge of God from general revelation, the unbeliever’s *suppression of the truth* results in *culpable ignorance*. The ignorance, which characterizes unbelieving thought, is something for which the unbeliever is morally responsible.

III. PAUL’S APOLOGIA

The Apostle does not begin by giving a personal testimony or by appealing to the felt-needs of his audience. He doesn’t mention how Jesus has made his life meaningful or appeal to the crowd to *try Jesus* for all your emotional aches and pains. Paul started with an emphasis upon his audience’s *ignorance*. He stated the obvious—we are inherently religious beings (17:22). Paul says they are *very religious* (from the Greek word DEISIDAIMŌN made from DEIDŌ *to fear* and DAIMŌN, *a divine being*). The term used to describe the Athenians in verse 22 (literally “fearers of the supernatural spirits”) is sometimes translated “very religious” and sometimes “somewhat superstitious”. There is no satisfactory English equivalent. “Very religious” is too complimentary; Paul was not prone to flattery, and according to Lucian, it was forbidden to use compliments before the Areopagus in an effort to gain its goodwill. “Somewhat superstitious” is perhaps a bit too critical in thrust. Although the term could sometimes be used among pagans as a compliment, it usually denoted an excess of strange piety.

- A. The Unbeliever's Ignorance. This was Paul's starting point—their worship, even if done with great devotion and profound sincerity, was still idolatry and therefore Paul issues a call to faith, a call to turn from ignorance to the true and living God.
- B. The Authority of God's word. The word translated *proclaims* in 17:22 (NIV) refers to a solemn declaration, which is made with authority. On the basis of God's authority Paul aimed to show his listeners that their *ignorance* was culpable and would no longer be tolerated; instead, God *commands* all men to *repent* (undergo a radical change of mind (17:30)). Paul's appeal to them to repent was grounded not in autonomous argumentation but the presupposed authority of God's Son (v. 31), an authority for which there was none more ultimate in Paul's reasoning. Paul's hearers were told that they must repent, for God had appointed a day of final judgment; if the philosophers did not undergo a radical shift in their mindset and confess their sinfulness before God, they would have to face the wrath of God on the day of final accounting. To whom would they have to give account? At this point Paul introduced the "Son of Man eschatology" of the gospels. The judgment would take place by a man (literally, a 'male') who had been ordained to this function by God. This man is the "Son of Man" mentioned in Daniel 7:13. In John 5:27, Christ spoke of himself, saying that the Father "gave him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man." After His resurrection Christ charged the apostles "to preach unto the people and to testify that this is He who is ordained of God to be the Judge of the living and the dead" (Acts 10:42). Paul declared this truth in his Areopagus apologetic, going on to indicate that God had given "assurance" or proof of the fact that Christ would be mankind's final Judge. This proof was provided by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.⁷

IV. THE OUTCOME OF PAUL'S APOLOGETIC (17:32-34)

Upon mentioning the resurrection, some of those in the crowd began to sneer and mock. Some said they would like to hear more and some responded in true faith. Ramsay is of the opinion that Paul was disappointed and somewhat disillusioned by his experience in Athens and decided to forsake presenting his doctrine in a way that reflected the current philosophical trends.⁸ I disagree with Ramsay's assessment, preferring instead F.F. Bruce's take, "At any rate, Paul had few converts in Athens; we are not told that he planted a church there, and although Athens was in the Roman province of Achaia it is a family resident in Corinth that he describes as 'the firstfruits of Achaia' (1 Cor. 16:15). But we should remember that Athens played no part in Paul's plan of campaign, he probably did not spend more than three or four weeks there; and, for the rest, if the response to his preaching during these weeks was scanty, the fault may be sought in the Athenians rather than in Paul's message. The popular idea that his determination, when he arrived in Corinth, to know nothing there 'save Jesus Christ, and him crucified,' was the result of disillusionment with the line of approach he had attempted at Athens, has little to commend it."⁹

CONCLUSION: The Gospel cannot be understood unless it is set in its biblical context—we cannot preach *Jesus* without the doctrine of God. We cannot preach the grace of God without the doctrine of God's judgment. We cannot preach forgiveness without the doctrine of sin. Why is it that we today do not follow Paul in this regard? "We do not speak as Paul spoke because we do not feel as Paul felt. We have never had the paroxysm of indignation which he had. Divine jealousy has not stirred within us. We constantly pray 'Hallowed be your Name', but we do not seem to mean it, or to care that his Name is so widely profaned. Why is this? It takes us a stage further back. If we do not speak like Paul because we do not feel like Paul, this is because we do not see like Paul. That was the order: he saw, he felt, he spoke. It all began with his eyes. When Paul walked round Athens, he did not just 'notice' the idols. The Greek verb used three times (16, 22, 23) is either *THEŌREŌ* or *ANATHEŌREŌ* and means to 'observe' or 'consider'. So he looked and looked, and thought and thought, until the fires of holy indignation were kindled with him. For he saw men and women, created by God in the image of God, giving to idols the homage which was due to him alone."¹⁰

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Noted sociologist Peter Berger says that *churchly* religiosity (that is religious belief and practice within the traditions of the principal Christian churches) has been on the decline in modern society. “In Europe this has generally taken the form of a progressive decline in institutional participation (attendance at worship, use of the sacraments, and the like), though there are important class differences in this. In America, on the contrary, there has been an increase in participation (as measured by church membership figures), though there are good reasons to think that the motives from participation have changed greatly from the traditional ones.” *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Doubleday & Co., 1969), p. 5. Recent studies confirm this assessment. People often exaggerate their involvement to pollsters. cf. Karen Owen, “Church-attendance figures ungodly high? Many say they go when truth is no” *Arizona Republic* Sept. 16, 1999.
- ² J. Ellul, *The New Demon* (Seabury, 1975). Neil Postman speaks of “Scientism”--the growing sense of absolute confidence of science to solve all our problems. Faith in science can serve in this sense as a religious substitute providing a comprehensive belief system that gives meaning to life as well as a sense of well-being, morality, and over immortality cf. his *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (Vintage, 1992), p. 147.
- ³ W. Edgar, *Reasons of the Heart: Recovering Christian Persuasion* (Baker, 1996), p. 53.
- ⁴ J.R.W. Stott, *The Spirit, The Church and the World: The Message of Acts* (IVP, 1990), p. 277.
- ⁵ W.M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and The Roman Citizen* (rpt. Baker, 1962), p. 243.
- ⁶ Greg Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith* (Covenant Media Foundation, 1996), p. 246. The main points in my outline have been adapted from Bahnsen’s chapter “The Encounter of Jerusalem with Athens” pp. 235-274.
- ⁷ *Ibid.* p. 268.
- ⁸ Ramsay, *op. cit.*, p. 252
- ⁹ F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Eerdmans, 1980), p. 304.
- ¹⁰ Stott, *op. cit.*, p. 290.