

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Easter Messages		Pastor/Teacher
Text:	Acts 17:16-34		Gary L. W. Johnson
Date:	April 17, 2022 (a.m.)		

THE RESURRECTION AND JUDGMENT TO COME

In 2 Corinthians 11:4 the apostle Paul warns about the danger of embracing *another* Jesus – one very different from the *real* Jesus. Today we are swarming with a plethora of them. We have, just to mention a few, the Jesus of the various cults, i.e., Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, the Health and Wealth crowd on PTL, etc. But we also have a large number of *other* ones within the ranks of contemporary Evangelicalism. There is the Jesus who frequently appears in the lyrics from different songs of Christian recording artist Rebecca St. James. In *Take All of Me*, written by Marty Sampson, the first stanza ends with *Take all of me, yeah/all of me*. She also croons, *Take me I am yours* and *All I want is you*. In her cover of Rich Mullins' *Hold Me Jesus*, she asks Jesus to, well, *hold her* because her life doesn't make sense, and she's *shaking like a leaf*. She adds in another song that she has fallen for Jesus *harder than the first time*. "All of these songs," as Steve Nichols writes, "focus not on any act of God in history, not on the concrete events of Christ's life and death and resurrection. These songs all lack what John Fischer lamented as a great loss, linking Jesus' love not to anything done in history but to the personal experiences of feeling Jesus near, of feeling him close during those hard times. Like a good boyfriend, Jesus shows up at the right moment, says the right thing, and knows how to hug. Take out the name *Jesus* that occurs from time to time and these songs could be sung to a boyfriend."¹ More recently, Harry Kraus has noted that what is happening here amounts to domesticating Jesus. "The gospel of a domesticated Jesus is all about me. My needs, my wants, my testimony, my ministry, my ability to do all the *Christian* stuff. It's all about me. Oh, I'm thankful all right. Thankful that God has used me to do good works. Thankful that he has given me a wonderful testimony to serve as an example to so many who admire me. When Jesus assumes his rightful place, prayer is all about aligning my will with his. It is characterized by thankfulness and awe. I submit my wants and my desires to him and *listen*. Prayer for those of us accustomed to domesticating Jesus takes on a different role. It's all about me, remember. Prayer sounds more like advice than submission and awe. *You know, God, you really need to change the way my wife thinks*. Prayer isn't about aligning my will with his. The domesticated Jesus aligns his will with mine. I name it and claim it. I really need a new car, a new house, a new TV. Of course, I'll use it for ministry. My needs, not Jesus, are central. Prayer in the name of a domesticated Jesus is all about *talking*, not listening. We domesticate Jesus every time we try to make him fit our agenda instead of listening to his."² It is important as we reflect on the importance of Easter that we make sure that we are focusing on the *Real* Jesus. We must carefully make sure that we are being faithful to the teaching of Scripture and not following the pattern of the world (Romans 12:2). "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 formation 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 marketplace. 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 sympathize 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 *Spermolōgos* 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 *Spermolōgos*, as one who aped the ways and words of philosophers."⁵ The word of the cross was to them foolish (1 Cor. 1:18), and in their pseudo-wisdom they knew not God (1 Cor. 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 Cor. 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 apologetic 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 Rom. 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 Finally, and most importantly, note the centrality of the doctrine of Christ’s resurrection. “The *resurrection* of Jesus is **proof of this to all men** (17:31). Paul thus came full circle, for it had been his *preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection* that had won him the invitation to address the Areopagus (17:18-19). The point is that the fact that *Jesus has risen* is proof that he has the authority to be both Redeemer and Judge. Had Jesus remained in the grave, there would be no reason to believe the gospel or fear his wrath. The gospel and all the claims of God would have rested in his grave for ever! *If Christ has not been raised*, Paul would later say with utter honesty, *[our] faith is futile; [we] are still in [our] sins*, and *If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men* (1 Cor. 15:17-18). Luke’s record focuses on those elements of Paul’s address which dramatize his assault on the Athenians’ idolatry, but there can be no doubt that Paul proclaimed Christ as the crucified and risen Saviour in the fullest sense of preaching the gospel.”¹¹

ENDNOTES

¹ Stephen J. Nichols, *Jesus Made in America: A Cultural History From the Puritans To the Passion of the Christ* (IVP, 2008), p. 140.

² H. L. Kraus, Jr., *Domesticated Jesus* (P&R, 2010), p. 153. Noted sociologist Peter Berger says that *churchly* religiosity (that is, religious belief and practice within the traditions of the principle 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).

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.

¹¹ G. J. Keddie, *You Are My Witnesses: The Message of the Acts of The Apostles* (Evangelical Press, 1993), p. 216.