

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Messages		Pastor/Teacher
Text:	Acts 17:16-34		Gary L. W. Johnson
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THE APOSTLE PAUL ON IDOLATRY ANCIENT AND MODERN

“All you need is love, all you need is love,
All you need is love, love is all you need
Love is all you need, love is all you need.”

These are the well-known lyrics to a song written by John Lennon (with contributions from Paul McCartney) and first performed by The Beatles on *Our World*, the first ever live global television link. Broadcast to 26 countries and watched by 350 million people, the program was broadcast via satellite on June 25, 1967. The BBC had commissioned The Beatles to write a song for the UK’s contribution to the program and this was the result. It is among the most famous and significant songs written by The Beatles. Asked to come up with a song containing a simple message that would be understood by viewers of all nationalities, John’s “All You Need Is Love” extended the message that he had first tried to put across in “The Word,” from their 1965 album *Rubber Soul*. “It was an inspired song and they really wanted to give the world a message,” said Beatles’ manager Brian Epstein. “The nice thing about it is that it cannot be misinterpreted. It is a clear message saying that love is everything.”¹ This anthem to the supremacy of love has also badly tainted our understanding of God. Carl Trueman complains, and rightly so in my opinion, that “the emphasis upon God’s love to the utter exclusion of everything else has become something of a commonplace. We see this in the collapse of the notion of penal substitution as an evangelical doctrine. Now, maybe I’m missing something, but of all the things taught in the Bible, the terrifying wrath of God would seem to be among the most self-evident of all. Thus, when I hear statements from evangelical theologians such as *God’s wrath is always restorative*, my mind goes straight to countless Old Testament passages, the Bible’s teaching about Satan, and New Testament characters such as Ananias and Sapphira. There was not much restoration for any of these fold – or are being swallowed alive by the earth, consumed by holy fire, and being struck dead for cheating the church actually therapeutic techniques intended to restore the individuals concerned? And when leading evangelicals tell me that penal substitution is tantamount to cosmic child abuse (don’t laugh – this is seriously argued by some leading evangelical theologians), I’m left wondering whether I should sit down and explain the doctrine to them, or whether I should merely tell them to go away and grow up. Do they really expect the church to take such claims as serious theological reflection?”² Noted NT scholar D. A. Carson has likewise noted this popular Pollyannaish way of defining God’s love, “we live in a culture in which many other and complementary truths about God are widely disbelieved. I do not think that what the Bible says about the love of God can long survive at the forefront of our thinking if it is abstracted from the sovereignty of God, the holiness of God, the wrath of God, the providence of God, or the personhood of God – to mention only a few nonnegotiable elements of basic Christianity. The result, of course, is that the love of God in our culture has been purged of anything the future finds uncomfortable. The love of God has been sanitized, democratized, and above all sentimentalized. This process has been going on for some time. My generation was taught to sing, “What the world needs now is love, sweet love,” in which we robustly instruct the Almighty that we do not need another mountain (we have enough of them), but we could do with some more love. The hubris is staggering.”³ The Bible does affirm that “God is love”

(1 John 4:8), but the converse is not true “love is God.” Love as defined by the Bible is light years removed from the popular notion as expressed by “All You Need Is Love.” Yet, a surprisingly large number of Evangelicals are embracing the theological musings of the Beatles’ John and Paul and not that of the Apostles’ John and Paul. Why? Francis Schaeffer, once again, saw this development with 20/20 vision. “Here is the great evangelical disaster – the failure of the evangelical world to stand for truth as truth. There is only one word for this – namely *accommodation*: the evangelical church has accommodated to the world spirit of the age.”⁴ Any time the surrounding culture shapes and gives direction to Christianity, natural revelation is substituted for special revelation and corruption takes place and idolatry occurs. Despite the current appearance of the complete secularization of Western Society, religion is actually thriving.⁵ 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 advances of science to mention only two of the new god-substitutes).⁶ 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 McLaine). “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*.”⁷ 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 confronting idolatry and 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 [the Greek word *theorountos* is the source for the word *theater*] 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.”⁸ Robert Reymond captures the scene that the Apostle saw: “If Paul entered the city from the south through the Piraeic gate leading to the harbor, he would have been confronted immediately with the sculpture of Neptune seated on a horse and hurling his trident. Nearby was the Temple of Ceres within which stood the sculptured forms of Minerva, Jupiter and Apollo, with statues of Mercury and the Muses near a sanctuary to Bacchus. Entering the Agora, the center of the city’s public life where citizens gathered to exchange the latest news and to debate with strangers (see Acts 17:21), which contained statues dedicated to Apollo, the patron deity of the city, and the Altar of the Twelve Gods (Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Hades, Apollo, Artemis, Hephaestus, Athena, Ares, Aphrodite, Hermes, Hestia; Demetrius and Dionysus were sometimes substituted for Hades and Hestia), which was for the Athenians what the Golden Milestone was to the Romans, Paul would have seen the craggy promontory of the Areopagus to the north on which rested the Temple to Mars, and looking

toward the east he would have seen the Acropolis on the rising ledges of which were shrines to Bacchus, Aesculapius, Venus, Earth, and Ceres, ending with the beautiful Temple of Unwinged Victory. Observation would have revealed to him that every public building in the Agora was a sanctuary to some god or goddess: the Record House was a temple of the Mother of the Gods, and the Council House enshrined statues of Apollo and Jupiter and an altar to Vesta. The theater was consecrated to Bacchus, and altars erected to the abstract ideas of Fame, Modesty, Energy, Persuasion, and Pity, along with alters *to unknown gods* (Pausanias 1.1.4; 5.14.8; Philostratus, Vit. Ap. 6.3). While the Athenians perceived these many altars to be expressions of religious *devotion*, Paul correctly perceived them to be acts of religious *ignorance* (Acts 17:23) dotting the streets and by-ways. On the Acropolis itself, the whole of which was one vast composition of architecture and sculpture dedicated to the nation's glory and the worship of its gods, stood the Temple of Victory which contained statues of Venus and the Graces. It also housed an edifice dedicated to Minerva, the goddess of health, and a shrine to Diana. Also sculptures of Theseus, Hercules, Earth and Minerva could be found there. The most magnificent edifice of all on the Acropolis was the Parthenon (the *Virgin's House*) dedicated to Minerva. A colossal statue of this goddess in ivory and gold stood within the columns of the Parthenon. Two other statues of Minerva also stood in the temple precincts – the most venerated of the three was called the *Erectheium*, and the third, the *Minerva Promachus* with spear and shield, rose in gigantic proportions above all the buildings of the Acropolis as the tutelary divinity of Athens and Attica. With just this much of a description of ancient Athens, one can understand why Luke tells us that Paul's spirit *was stirred within him when he saw the city was full of idols* (Acts 17:16). Indeed, it was so full of statues to gods that one ancient writer said there were more statues in Athens than in all the rest of Greece put together, while another said that in Athens it was easier to meet a statue than to meet a man."⁹

- 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). 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).¹⁰
- 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, and given him a sense of purpose, 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)). What is it that Paul is specifically addressing in his call for repentance? It is the sin of idolatry. 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.¹¹
- 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.

CONCLUSION: The idolatry of the Athenians was obvious and deeply troubled the Apostle Paul. The kind of “Evangelical” idolatry that I have addressed in this sermon is not as obvious as that seen in Ancient Athens, but it is nonetheless deeply troubling. The out and out rejection of traditional Christian beliefs regarding the Sovereignty of God, His wrath, the true nature of sin and the fallen condition of all humanity *all* stem from having passed Biblical Christianity through the cultural sieve of our postmodern sensitivities. What comes out is a very docile, sentimental and domesticated deity, one very much compatible with our own Pelagian make-up. As noted last week, this is what Bart Campolo, Doug Pagitt and Spencer Burke have done. They have, in the words of C. S. Lewis, put *God in the dock*, “The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defense for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God’s acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock.”¹² When this happens *everything* that is distinctively essential to the gospel is radically altered: The character of God, the nature of sin, the work of Christ – all of it is drastically changed. The rejection of the Biblical picture of the wrath of God affects the doctrine of sin, atonement and propitiation. “Ask the question: Why must sin be removed if God is not angry? Surely the answer is not that it is just better for man for it to be so. It must be removed because of God and what God thinks of it. Ask a further question: If a man’s sin is not cleaned up and he dies with it, what happens to him? Biblically the answer must be that he undergoes the judgment of God because of his sin. Why? – because God is bound to judge sin according to retributive justice. These answers show that sin is not simply something unacceptable in man as a form of subjective wrong that can be wiped away. It is also hostility in relation to God and removal of this hostility cannot be other than two-sided. This is just another way of saying that God is angry at sin. The expiation of man’s sin is half the story and propitiation is the other half. Expiation without propitiation is like mending a punctured tire without blowing it up again. Put another way, sin and guilt are not things that can be wiped away, like dirt from the window. They are serious because they block communion with God in the personal realm. They come between man and God because they are offensive to God. Sin alters relations between God and man, so the problem must be tackled in such a way as to restore the relationship. The offence of sin must be dealt with by removing the reasons for anger in God. Expiation must have a Godward perspective for God to treat the sinner differently. It must be brought back to propitiation to express the meaning of grace in the restoration of a personal relation between God and the sinner. It is in this sphere that the whole of Christ’s work as advocate and intercessor takes on its importance. Expiation is not a removal of sin announced to man in a prophetic declaration on the part of God. It has its meaning as an aspect of propitiation related to the priestly office of Christ who enters into God’s presence pleading the merits of his own death for sin. God in Christ fulfils the meaning of the Old Testament sacrificial system in that he himself provides the means for removing his own wrath.”¹³ In other words if God is divorced from the very doctrines that Campolo, Pagitt and Burke wish to revamp or discard, a different Gospel *emerges* along with a different God – an idol. The Apostle Paul would have expressed more than the kind of distress he felt in Athens, he would have pronounced an apostolic anathema on this kind of idolatry (Gal. 1: 9).

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All>.

² C. Trueman, *The Wages of Spin: Critical Writings On Historic & Contemporary Evangelicalism* (Mentor, 2004), p. 165. As we have documented, the Emergent crowd has repeatedly heaped disdain on the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement. Both Brian McLaren and Steven Chalke are prime examples.

³ D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of The Love of God* (Crossway, 2000), p. 11.

⁴ F. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Crossway, 1984), p. 37. In an issue of *Christianity Today* (Nov. 2006), an article called “Stopping Cultural Drift” that highlighted Asian theologian Simon Chan and his book *Liturgical Theology: The Church as a Worshipping Community*, Chan pinpointed the very same issue – Evangelicals are extremely prone to cultural accommodation – the reason why? “Because we pay little attention to church history, we fail to gain critical distance from our own time and culture. Again, a typical example comes from the newest evangelical revolutionaries. In their book, Frost and Hirsch summarily dismiss all of church history from Constantine to the 1990’s with a sweep of the hand as merely an experiment in ‘Christendom,’ a way of thinking that is now irrelevant. It is difficult to imagine how evangelical missional thinking of this sort, despite its many keen insights, is going to avoid the traps of previous evangelical ‘revolutions,’ since it ignores the work of the Spirit in the body of Christ through time and culture.” (p. 69).

⁵ 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.

⁶ J. Ellul, *The New Demon* (Seabury, 1975). The late Neil Postman spoke 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 *Technology: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (Vintage, 1992), p. 147.

⁷ W. Edgar, *Reasons of the Heart: Recovering Christian Persuasion* (Baker, 1996), p. 53.

⁸ J. R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, The church, and the World: The Message of Acts* (IVP, 1990), p. 277.

⁹ R. L. Reymond, *Paul: Missionary theologian: A Survey of His Missionary Labours and Theology* (Mentor, 2002), p. 160.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

¹² C. S. Lewis, *God in The Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Eerdmans, 1970), p. 244.

¹³ Paul Wells, *Cross Words: The Biblical Doctrine of The Atonement* (Christian Focus, 2006), p. 193.