

## **The Relevance of Eternal Truths**

**April 27, 2008**

**Acts 17:22-34** (From Eugene Peterson's The Message):

So Paul took his stand in the open space at the Areopagus and laid it out for them. "It is plain to see that you Athenians take your religion seriously. When I arrived here the other day, I was fascinated with all the shrines I came across. And then I found one inscribed, TO THE GOD NOBODY KNOWS. I'm here to introduce you to this God so you can worship intelligently, know who you're dealing with.

"The God who made the world and everything in it, this Master of sky and land, doesn't live in custom-made shrines or need the human race to run errands for him, as if he couldn't take care of himself. He makes the creatures. The creatures don't make him. Starting from scratch, he made the entire human race and made the earth hospitable, with plenty of time and space for living so we could seek after God, and not just grope around in the dark but actually find him. He doesn't play hide-and-seek with us. He's not remote: he's near. We live and move in him, can't get away from him! One of your poets said it well: 'We're the God-created.' Well, if we are the God-created, it doesn't make a lot of sense to think we could hire a sculptor to chisel a god out of stone for us, does it?

"God overlooks it as long as you don't know any better: but that time is past. The unknown is now known, and he's calling for a radical life-change. He has set a day when the entire human race will be judged and everything set right. And he has already appointed the judge, confirming him before everyone by raising him from the dead."

At the phrase "raising him from the dead," the listeners split: Some laughed at him and walked off making jokes; others said, "Let's do this again. We want to hear more." But that was it for the day, and Paul left. There were still others, it turned out, who were convinced then and there, and stuck with Paul: among them Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris.

One: This is the Word of the Lord. **All: Thanks be to God.**

It is important to communicate with other people in ways they will understand. As Christians, we need to share our own faith in inviting ways that do not put others on the defensive. The challenge is communicating our message in ways that people can get past our human sinfulness and find the God of grace. Probably all of us can tell stories of some Christian we have encountered, who probably meant well, but ended up being offensive or overly aggressive in their tactics.

Evangelism is challenging and we face a far different set of problems today than the early church did. Before Constantine became emperor of the Roman Empire, it was a crime to be a Christian. For three centuries, the church was persecuted and martyrs died simply because they professed faith in Christ. Then in 312, when Constantine, who was a Christian, became emperor, things changed drastically. Christianity was no longer illegal: the emperor mandated that it would now be the state religion. The church no longer needed to fear persecution: in fact the state actively encouraged people to follow

Christ. There are plenty of examples of Christians who have used their state-sanctioned power to exercise justice and compassion, but there are some dark chapters, including the Crusades and the Inquisition, where the church's power was abused.

In the Western world, after Constantine, it became normal to go to church; being a non-believer was seen as strange. That is beginning to change. Scholars believe that the last fifty years or so we have been moving to a post-Constantinian era, where religion is becoming less a part of mainstream culture. Fewer people know even the most basic facts about the Bible. Less than half of Americans know the names of the four Gospels or that Genesis is the first book of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> Many Americans seem uninterested, even apathetic, about learning the basic Christian beliefs.

The key for Christians is to continue to reach out, non-judgmentally, with open arms, ready to receive people where they are. Some efforts are good ways to reach out, while others become gimmicks. We may feel the pressure to use cheap tricks to try to pull people back into church. We are tempted to look enviously at mega-churches where the pews are packed. And some mega-churches are getting it right. But sometimes people are attracted to the church that entertains them the most. You may have heard of churches that have lions and tigers or fireworks or monster truck rallies for their Vacation Bible Schools. When people come for those events, they remember the fireworks and the other gimmicks, but not the message. As a church we need to always remain true to who we are.

I think Paul's encounter with the Athenians can teach us about how to share the good news of the gospel. In the first century, most Christian converts were not very well educated and many were illiterate. However, the kind of people Paul encountered in Athens were more like twenty-first century Americans than any other group of people he met in the New Testament. Athens was the center of cultural activity, political power, monetary wealth, and intellectual freedom. These Athenians were well-educated and valued philosophy. For entertainment, they gathered to debate moral and religious questions.

When he is talking with Jewish Christians, Paul usually quotes the Hebrew Scriptures because those texts were meaningful to his audience. Jews knew those Scripture passages; it was a language they understood, and a natural connection. However, Paul knew that his Greek audience was unfamiliar with the Jewish Bible, so he quoted Greek poets and philosophers. Paul met the Athenians where they were. Paul never used Jesus' name directly in this speech, but everything he was talking about was centered on Christ.

I admire Paul's wisdom and discretion as he was speaking to the Athenians. He realized that if he were harsh and heavy handed, he would be dismissed. As Paul walked around Athens, he saw tons of idols. Idol worship was so detestable to Christians and Jews because it assumed human hands could make a god. As Christians, we affirm that it is God who created and formed us, not we who can make gods. It offended Paul to see

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Jacoby, author of [The Age of American Unreason](#), shared these facts in an interview on The Colbert Report on April 22, 2008.

all these idols. Paul could have easily flown off the handle, but instead he found something positive that he could build on. The idols pointed to their religious convictions, so he complimented the Athenians for how religious they were. By beginning with what they already valued, Paul had a starting point.

Many people today claim to be spiritual, but not religious. Rather than sitting in judgment for their lack of devotion to a Christian community, we can connect with their sincere spiritual longing. I believe we all have a yearning for God. I believe that seeking God together with a community who keeps each other accountable and supports each other in the good times and the bad times of our lives is the best way to grow in faith. In his commentary on Acts, Will Willimon suggests that, “The church, rather than standing back from non-Christians religiosity, pointing our fingers in righteous indignation, should, like Paul in Athens, minister to their searching.”<sup>2</sup>

As I read Acts 17, I couldn’t help but think about our church’s new contemporary worship service, which will begin next Sunday. This service has some people excited, while others are uneasy. Our 11:00 a.m. service is deeply meaningful to many of you, but it is not the one and only faithful way to worship. I personally find our 11:00 worship to be rich, spirit-filled, and thought-provoking. If you are fed at this worship service, please do not feel that you need to change: that is wonderful! However, there are some people in this church and in our community who are not currently attending worship. They are fed by a different style.

I can promise you the message will remain the same: the way of communicating that message is what will change slightly. At the early service, our focus will continue to be on following and serving the crucified and risen Christ as we seek to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. It is the job of this particular church and of the church universal in every generation to impart the gracious truth that we have to share with people in ways that will allow them to discover that God is real and alive.

This new worship service is a positive step forward, but please do not think that starting a new service with a different style is the one magic bullet, the only thing keeping non-church goers away from churches across the country. My generation is less interested than previous generations in joining civic groups and church organizations. Often times, college students and recent graduates take a break from church and when they try to re-enter church life, they do not find the same community they had in high school. Some people stay away because they are turned off by Christians who have offended them.

We believe that Christ rose from the grave due to the testimony of hundreds of followers who saw Jesus after the resurrection. We cannot ultimately prove with scientific evidence what they saw. We have to have faith and trust that Christ is our risen Lord. Because ultimately we have to rely on faith, there are many Christians who view reason and science as the enemy, which saddens me. Those Christians who discount the value of science also disregard global warming, which is threatening to destroy the planet

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<sup>2</sup> Will Willimon, Commentary on Acts: Interpretation Series, p. 143.

that has been entrusted to our care. Genesis tells us to be good stewards of this earth. So we are being authentic to our biblical faith when they pay attention to global warming and try to do something to stop it.

The Christian faith loses credibility with non-believers when we appear to be afraid of knowledge. Just because we cannot prove part of our faith does not mean we have to look at truth as the enemy. In fact, I have always appreciated the Presbyterian Church because we take seriously God's instructions to love the Lord with all our minds. We do not need to fear the truth. Since God is the source of all truth, we grow in our knowledge of God when we try to understand God's creation. We honor our Creator by using the brains God has given to us.

We have such a great diversity in the Christian church; there will be times when some Christians will act in ways that do not honor Christ. And Christians as an entire group can get a bad rap because many people will group together all Christians for the mistakes or misstatements of a few people.

In an attempt to overcome this baggage, a pastor in the Los Angeles area proposed doing a series of talks that he called "Confessions of a Sinful Church." To promote the event, church members passed out postcards at local college campuses. Some examples of the topics he discussed are: "Apology #1: We're Sorry for Our Self-Righteousness and Hypocrisy. Apology #2: We're Sorry for Our Endorsement of Slavery. and Apology #5: We're Sorry for Saying the Earth is Flat." The postcard mentioned, "We are serious about our need to confess to you. It is not a joke."<sup>3</sup> A little honesty can go a long way in bringing about reconciliation.

During the early days of the second American invasion of Iraq, a group of soldiers set out for a local mosque to contact the town's chief cleric. Their goal was to ask his help in organizing the distribution of relief supplies. But a mob gathered, fearing the soldiers were coming to arrest their spiritual leader or destroy the mosque, a holy shrine.

Hundreds of devout Muslims surrounded the soldiers, waving their hands in the air and shouting, as they pressed in toward the heavily armed platoon. The commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Hughes, thought fast. Picking up a loudspeaker, he told his soldiers to "take a knee," meaning to kneel on one knee. Next he ordered them to point their rifles toward the ground. Then his order was: "Smile."

At that, the crowd's mood morphed. A few people were still yelling, but most were now smiling in return. A few patted the soldiers on the back, as Hughes ordered them to walk slowly away, backward, still smiling. The quick-witted move was the culmination of a dizzying array of split-second social calculations.<sup>4</sup>

To address today's concerns, as Christians, we have to think quickly on our feet like Colonel Hughes did. It is challenging to figure out how to be the church today. It feels like our world is changing so quickly, but even though what is relevant will change, God's eternal truth never will. Each generation will have different fads, but we are all in need of God's grace. The good news is that the Lord has used sinful people like you and

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<sup>3</sup> Un-Christian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity and Why it Matters. David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, p. 55-56.

<sup>4</sup> From the prologue to Daniel Goldman's book Social Intelligence.

me to be part of the body of Christ for generation upon generation. Even though it may require us to think a little bit about how to best communicate our message, the cross and the empty tomb will always be powerful symbols. When we are tempted to feel discouraged, we can rely on God, who is our rock. God offers us a hope that is dependable and eternal. Thanks be to God. Amen.