

“How Far is God?”

Reading: 1 Peter 3:13-22; Acts 17:22-31

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We Christians are a strange lot. We have, right at the heart of our message, this unusual command by Jesus to go and spread the word. In Matthew’s telling of the gospel, Jesus’ last words are that command to go and make disciples of all nations; in Luke’s telling of the story of Jesus, right at the beginning of the book of Acts, at the beginning of the story of the church, just before Jesus ascends to be with His Father, He commands His church to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. And so we are a missionary faith. We proselytize and evangelize and we believe we have been commanded by God to share our message with the entire world, and we’ve taken a lot of criticism because of it. Many sins have been committed in the name of evangelism. Many people have been lost to the faith because of our clumsy or insensitive attempts to introduce them to Christ.

We’re a strange bunch. How many other religions have this notion of evangelism at their core? When was the last time you were cornered by a missionary from a different religion who tried to convince you of their beliefs about God? It happens from time to time, to be sure, but Christianity is unique among the major world religions because of its missionary zeal. You might get a couple of Jehovah’s Witnesses or Mormons knocking on your door sometimes, but they learned that from us. Some religions are spread by the belief that they have the right to conquer unbelievers through the use of force, and other religions spread simply by having babies and being a part of a culture that gets passed down from generation to generation. But we have a belief that our message needs to be shared and we think we’ve been commanded by God to do it.

But how many of us really look forward to those visits by a Jehovah’s Witness missionary? There’s a lot of baggage and discomfort and awkwardness associated with our missionary call, especially in American culture where you’re mostly expected to get on with your life and let others get on with theirs. Some of us are particularly gifted in the desire and ability to share our faith with others, while others of us just find the whole concept stressful. And then we come to this story of Paul preaching the message in Athens, and we are reminded that our missionary calling is far more than just a way to keep the religion going, and it’s more than just a way to make our church bigger. This has to do with how the world works and what sort of God we worship.

Athens was the center of learning; it was where you had to go if you wanted to be educated by the best and latest ideas. Paul speaking there might be somewhat like a missionary going to Oxford or Harvard; the Areopagus in Athens was where you would go to have the cutting-edge debates of the day. And we learn that Paul was invited to speak not because these people were interested in converting to a new religion but because he was preaching something they hadn’t heard before: “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?” they asked him. “You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” And our narrator clues us in that “all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.” They’re interested in novelty and intellectual fashion, but we learn a few verses before that that Paul is motivated by a distress at seeing an incredible number of idols in the city. He hadn’t come to Athens intending to start a mission – he was really on his way somewhere else – but he couldn’t help but share the good news with people who were so lost.

What he has to say to them teaches us an awful lot about how we can go about our mission, because our mission is the same as Paul's. There are lots of other examples we could look at for methods of reaching out to the lost, but this is one of the key examples. And what's really important to notice is that this has to do with far more than just missionary activity: this has to do with how the people of God relate to the rest of the world, so this matters whether you're trying to evangelize someone or not. This matters in how the church lives its life in the world.

I've seen people often use this incident as the basis for a comparison between Athens and Jerusalem. Especially in Christian academic settings, people like to talk about bridging the gap between Athens and Jerusalem, where we see Athens as a stronghold of secular humanistic reason and Jerusalem as a city of religious faith. So Paul's sermon is presented as this sort of showdown or confrontation between the worlds of faith and reason. And while there's some truth to that, it's not really a fair characterization of either Athens or Jerusalem. The worlds of faith and reason simply are not that far separated. Jerusalem wasn't simply a city of faith, it was a city with an ancient tradition of wisdom. And Athens, too, was steeped in religion. In fact it's quite clear from the passage that what motivates Paul in the first place is that he's "greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols." If we're being fair, we find that the city of faith is also full of reason, and the city of reason is also full of faith. The two worlds are not so far removed as some would like.

So Paul's address to the Athenians is sometimes taken as an example of bridging the worlds of faith and reason, but in reality it's much more an example of one way Christians can relate to the world of non-Christians in general. What's important to notice that that Paul is not disputing with the Athenians, he is in fact showing them great respect while he also challenges them with the truth. And that's the key point where we as Christians often fail. We have bought into the belief that sharing our faith must involve showing people how wrong they are, how mistaken they are, how stupid they have always been, and we're rightfully ashamed of that. We've thought that evangelizing the lost is a contest or a battle of wits in which we have to defeat the other person and force them to agree with us, but then we look at some of our neighbors and we realize that they're not actually that bad, so why do I have to defeat them?

But that's not what Paul does when he meets the Athenians. He shows them great respect, and I think he does so based on a rather shocking statement he makes: God "is not far from any one of us." Stop and think about that, and then think about how the church often relates to people outside the church. "He is not far from any one of us." Paul is not speaking to Christians or Jews when he says that. He's speaking to pagans who are tripping over their idols and infatuated with their own intelligence. We could come up with all kinds of ways that the Greeks of that time were opposed to God or involved in idolatry or participating in sinful practices, and yet Paul still believes that God is not far from them. God is not far even from the Greeks. Do we believe that? Do we act like that in our interactions with the rest of the world?

Some Christians act and preach that we need to take Christ into the culture. What if He's already there? Some preach that we need to claim our culture for Christ. What if He's already claimed it? That's not at all to say that the world and those in it apart from Christ are not in need of a savior, but what if God is already at work among them and present among them in ways we too easily forget? What if God really is not far from each one of us, even the pagan Athenians?

Paul does not come to the Athenians with a Messiah complex. He's not a know-it-all. He's not an intellectual conqueror, and he neither ignores nor belittles their culture and beliefs. He assumes that God is not far from them and he looks for the ways God might already be at work. He searches their lives for that spark of light that could be kindled into the blaze of God's redeeming work, and then he gives them the good news about that spark. They don't recognize God's work; they're ignorant of His character and power. Paul introduces them to the one who is already there.

That's a much different approach to relating to the world than many Christians have taken through the ages. We've sometimes assumed, or at least behaved as though, God is only present among us, and it's up to us to carry God out into the world of unenlightened savages. *We* are their saviors, in other words. Or, worse yet, we pretend as though our holiness runs the risk of getting soiled if we go out into the world because we think God isn't out there, He's only in here. We've sometimes thought that holiness means the world has nothing to offer us, because God has no presence in the world. And so the church has sometimes been guilty of cloistering itself away from the world: we want to stay close to God, and God isn't out there, so we don't go out there.

And, incidentally, that's not too unlike how the Athenians themselves viewed the gods. The gods were, at least in some instances, far away, distant and unapproachable. The gods generally had their own thing going on and humans had their own thing going on, and you just did your best to keep the gods from getting angry with you and maybe you could sometimes bribe them into doing you a favor. According to one story, that's how the Athenians came up with their altar to an unknown god. There was a plague ravaging the city several hundred years before Christ, and when there was no relief in sight they determined that there must be a god angry with them. But there were literally hundreds of gods to choose from, so they consulted with a man named Epimenides who concluded that there was an as-yet unknown god causing the problem. Their gods were not close enough to them to be a source of hope, or even for them to know their names.

But Paul gives them the good news that God is not, in fact, far from them, and God is actually eager for them to know Him. He begins the relationship by valuing them and their culture and their history; there's something already here to work with because God has gone before him. So, in contrast to how far too many Christians have related to the world, Paul begins by asking himself what *he* can learn from *them*, not by strategizing how he can force them to learn what he thinks they need to know. Our reading from 1 Peter reinforces this: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with *gentleness and respect*, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander." Knowing God better than someone else or before someone else does not make us better than them or give us privilege or power in our relationship, it only gives us a greater obligation to show them love and respect.

And it's worth noting how little respect Paul gets in return, but that doesn't slow him down or tempt him to return evil with evil. Keep in mind that Paul is a man of great intellect, highly educated, and had been deeply respected in his own culture. But the Athenians regard him as a curiosity, not a peer. They want to hear from him simply because he represents something new, not something true. They don't care about his religious pedigree. They don't care that he's been given a commission as an Apostle by the risen Jesus Christ Himself. They don't care about his profound knowledge of Scripture

and Jewish tradition. In the end most of them sneered at him, some of them politely put him off, and only a few of them took him seriously. There's very little fruit, there's very little respect, but Paul comes to them from a position of concern for their souls and respect for who they are and what God has been doing among them. He doesn't treat them as horrible sinners in need of a fire-and-brimstone tirade, he treats them as God's offspring who are in need of guidance.

What do we have to learn from the world? Are we even close enough to the world to learn anything from it, or do we sequester ourselves away in fear? It's an ancient claim of Christian thinkers that everyone is reaching out for God in one way or another, though they may not have any clue of who they're reaching for and might even reject the very notion of God. How can we show them the truth of a God who is real, who is present, who has been at work in their lives and loved them before they even knew about Him? God is at work all around us. How can we participate?



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