

Our Opportunity

Acts 17:16-23 ¹⁶ Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. ¹⁷ Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbling man want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak?" ²⁰ For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore, we want to know what these things mean." ²¹ For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing. ²² Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; ²³ for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you:

Introduction: I wonder if you watching the news on TV as a crowd of "peaceful protesters" run riot over cities, become as provoked within yourselves as much as Paul did as he watched the people of Athens give themselves to their plethora of false gods. I know for one reason or another you feel provoked. In fact, our whole nation today is in a state of provocation. **But are we provoked as Paul was and for the reason Paul was and will we allow ourselves to be provoked to the same action Paul took?** All through out Athens, as in no other city he had been to, Paul saw a city full of idols... statues... representing the gods of the Athenians. Let us not be distracted by the images themselves. Paul was not interested in tearing them down per se. Only the activity around them revealed that the people of Athens were very religious, very engaged in seeming religious activity but in all of it the one true God was unknown and missed altogether.

These Athenians had constructed out their various religions a strategy in which to deal with the inner stirrings of their souls. Regularly a new god was imported into the city with the hope that it might complete their search and answer their longings. No god did and so these Athenians kept stacking up one god upon another. The city was full of idols and altars and temples to these gods. But the deep matters of their souls went unresolved and Paul knew that his God, who alone could answer their great need, was unknown to them, unmet by them. How maddening to see the riot of their worship and know that it was futile and empty and ultimately destructive to their lives and those around them! Their religiosity left unchallenged, unchecked, uncorrected was only going to lead them further and further away from the truth and deeper and deeper into darkness. Paul had to address their religion and address where it failed in meeting the great impulse of their beings. Paul had to then tell them where that impulse could be met. So, he began speaking, in their market, to whoever he could

and eventually he was able to address the leading figures and thinkers of that city on this very topic.

Our nation today needs people who will react as Paul reacted... with a proper recognition of what is before us, with the proper spirit of provocation at what we see and with the readiness to address everyone you can in the marketplace about the deeper issue lying behind the strange religious activity that we are now witnessing in our nation. And make no mistake this is a religious exercise at heart. What we are presently seeing is the blossoming of a new religion or a new religious expression. It is a religion made up of three parts, 1st the congealing of complaint against some original sin and 2nd a human effort at reform with 3rd a vision of a future hell to be avoided and heaven to be won. All religions are made of the same formula. This new religion is multifaceted. Right now, it bears the marks of social justice, and anti-racism, it can be blended into passions for economic justice, climate relief, communal utopianism, and the like. At the base it is a religion...with a complaint, with an effort at human reform and a vision of hell to be avoided and heaven to be won. Just as Paul saw Athens being swallowed up in false religions that were destructive, de-humanizing and God denying and so was vexed. We need to see what is before us as it is. We need to see it in the same way Paul saw the idolatry of Athens.

1st Let me develop this further by briefly explaining to you what lies underneath all religions... **John 16:8-11** reveals the probing and convicting work that the Holy Spirit has brought to the heart of every person since the day Adam and Eve disobeyed God and fell into sin... sinfulness has plagued humankind from that point on. John tells us that the Holy Spirit is at work convicting people of sin (their guilt before God) of righteousness (the desire to be good and knowledge that they are not) and consequently of judgment. This convicting work intensifies in humanity when a faithful, Spirit filled church engages lost people with the declaration of the person and work of Jesus Christ. But even before we go to people with the message of Jesus they are under this conviction. It is not an understanding generated from their natural thinking. It is a concern that is pressed upon them by the Spirit of God.

And here is what people do with this threefold conviction from God: They suppress it. **Romans 1:18** says, *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness...* You can't suppress what is not there. God is not silent. He speaks to all people and makes Himself known to them and they suppress this knowledge but still they come away convicted of sin, a lack of righteousness and of pending accountability (of judgment) none the less. Because people will not go to God for the answer to this pressing God agitated concern in their lives... and yet the concern still is there... they then produce new strategies for dealing with this conviction. And thus, religions are born. Every religion stands on these three things: A recognition of sin and guilt, a formulation for

achieving a right state, and an idea of judgment to be avoided and transcendent state to be realized. **Every religion will have some idea of sin to be avoided or overcome, some idea of righteousness to be gained or realized and some idea of consequence in the future to avoided or to be pursued.**

Now their formulations and strategies and perceptions are wrong but the three points of concern they attempt to address are true, produced by the Holy Spirit and need addressing. There is sin. There is righteousness. And there is judgment.

Just here consider the latest upheaval of protest largely rising from a younger generation in our land. We cannot completely understand the true nature of their complaint. It is shifting all the time, but we can at least identify these three components. The protesters believe that there is an original **sin** in our nation that has not been properly addressed and is still bearing its poisonous fruit. (Again, I am not agreeing with the force of their complaint only describing it.)

At the same time, they are vigorously attempting to absolve themselves of this sin through a series of dramatic actions which they believe are right or good actions. They offer us a liturgy we must all say, we must all confess the same things, for example, white privilege, we must all acknowledge systemic racism, if we don't we are guilty of being complicit in that racism. - We must say "*Black Lives Matter.*" We cannot say "*All Lives Matter*" nor even "*All black lives matter.*" And when we say "*Black Lives Matter*" their orthodoxy dictates that we mean only black lives that suffer violence at the hands of police, as in the **158** that died in police shootings in 2019. We must not be referring to the black babies that are annually aborted at a larger rate than are born in New York City. Nor of the roughly **3000** black lives that are lost in black on black violence in the same year. No, we must say what is dictated. - Again, in acts of righteousness they must all take action against whatever institutions they believe house this sin and they must attempt to tear those houses down or burn them down. (I am not agreeing with this understanding or their efforts. It is a fruitless religion after all. But only notice that there is a striving here to right themselves by projecting on our nation, on something external from themselves, their unique construction of **righteousness.**)

And they do all of this with an eschatological viewpoint - a view to some destiny out there. So, they employ phrases like "*a day of reckoning for America.*" Sounds kind of like a judgment day. And they have ideas of a utopian society that they will construct in the place of the nation that they see coming under judgment.

Around all of this is a lot of self-love mixed in with self-loathing turned outward into anger and hatred and superiority. An emotional mix often found at the heart of many a false religion.

2nd let me express the irony of this situation. These protesters are revealing to the Church the core components of a message that the Church has neglected for decades. Our neglect has not been to fail to lead the way in championing social reform or social justice; it has not been the failure to identify and address the forces of racism; it has not been the failure to call for a healthier environment or a more equitable economic system... It has been a failure to present to lost people a message of good news in Jesus Christ that will satisfactorily answer the Spirit driven awareness that is in all people of their sin, their lack of righteousness and the reality of oncoming judgment.

Our churches have been grooming a presentation or public image in order to attract people to ourselves and to Christ. We have offered people a salvation that promises significance, meaning, purpose, community, a healthy self-esteem, a place of belonging, a deliverance from self-defeating constructs to attitudes of acceptance and personal affirmation... but it is a salvation that does not strike the core of people's Spirit authored, subconscious need to have their sin identified and their guilt removed, their lives turned into the way of an unrealized righteousness and the need to escape an oncoming judgment.

This generation of protesters are twisting this consciousness and selectively pointing it outward at our nation, our history, our past and present and saying *"There is a sin among us" "We are going to protest it's the righteous thing to do" "There must be a reckoning and a judgment made and reparations given. We can create a new and better society. We can bring down hell on some and heaven to others."* It is not possible. It is not possible because they are the sinners, they are the unrighteous, they are coming before the Judge. But they are more right in many ways than the church has been because they know what needs to frame religion and the conversation that is most persuasive and powerful that should it form around... even if their religion is false and it is. There must be a confronting sin and confessing it, there must be a righteousness found that would bring us to truth. There is a hell and a heaven. Only we do not make it. God does and He determines in judgment who will go to either.

3rd What is our opportunity in this? We must talk with those we can and turn the finger that is being pointed outward back inward where the Spirit is at work. The protesters are striking out in a mad act and destructive act of self-righteousness. They are constructing a religion and idols and altars that the we in the Kingdom of God; we in the church must never bow before. Instead we must pursue dialogues in the gospel. We must again turn their fingers to pointing back to themselves where the Spirit is convicting them of sin, them of unrighteousness and them of judgment.

Let us agree with them this far. There is sin in the world and the sins of the past find their way into the present. There is a need to do what is right and there has been a

failure to live in righteousness and there is a judgment coming that will determine hell or heaven for us all. Agree with them thus far. But then tell them the turn does not begin with society as a whole. It begins in each human heart. And the turn is not one we take before one another to measure up to social pressure. It is a turn we must take before the God of all creation before who we must give an answer.

From there sin, their sins must be explored and confessed. And they must be confessed foremost as sins before a holy and loving God. Then their lack of righteousness needs to be exposed and the impossibility for them to generate a righteousness that will cover their sins and make them right with God needs to be made plain to them. Finally, they need to understand that as a result they face God's just punishment and His everlasting hell.

Here is our opportunity to talk and listen and then turn the conversation inward to the truth that demands good news... the good news of a Savior who became sin for us and bore on the cross our guilt... the good news of a Savior who lived a righteous life, and would cover us with his perfect righteousness and pour into us that righteousness so that we may live good works and do good to all people... a Savior who would rescue us from hell and is preparing a place in heaven for all who found the answer to this deep need in Him alone.

The opportunity is to talk with them about sin and righteousness and judgment. It is the opportunity we have to join in the Spirit's deep convicting work in their lives. These protesters are framing the conversation for us. But they are bowing at wrong altar. God and His gospel are unknown to them. Show them where things must turn and where the answer is found in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is our opportunity. Let us take it.