



A Message of Truth in a Postmodern World Acts 17:16-34

Tuesday Bible Study Outline-Synodical Convention
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“One Message -- CHRIST -- His Love Is Here For You”

Almost ten years ago, a film titled *The Truman Show* gave us the tragic situation of a man whose whole life, unknown to him, was a television program. His family and friends were all actors, playing roles. His world was lived under a huge dome, a gigantic sound stage he thought was real.

At the end of the film Truman finally figures it out as his sailboat runs up against a wall and he ascends a staircase that promises to take him from this fantasy world to what's real and true. It's then that the director of the show breaks in to try to get Truman to stay. “Was nothing real?” Truman asks the director. “You were real,” says the director, “That's what made you so good to watch.” And then the Director says, “Listen to me, Truman. There's no more truth out there than there is in the world I created for you. Same lies. The same deceit.”

And with that we're given a vivid statement of our culture, what it is liked to be trapped in world where real truth is an illusion, the rabbit out there 6 inches ahead of the chasing dog. Film after film – *The Matrix*, *Wag the Dog*, *Groundhog Day*, *the 6th Sense*, *Bulworth* (the list goes on) – gives us this idea that the real and the true are absolutely an illusion and absolutely elusive.

And then there are the reality shows that end up being anything but real – singers on *American Idol* who can't sing, and we're supposed to believe that eating maggots or being overrun by rats is somehow “real.” Language in such a culture can morph into a secret code to where someone walks up to a Starbucks Counter and says, “Double Ristretto Venti Nonfat Organic Chocolate Brownie Frappuccino Extra Hot with Foam and Whipped Cream Upside Down Double Blended.” And what scares me is that some of you know what that looks like.

It's in that culture we live, and it's to that culture we're sent—a culture seeking a staircase, a door, to some truth, some reality that sticks. It's a culture that turns those doors into a “Let's Make a Deal,” as one truth, one reality, and then another vie for our attention and loyalty. So a woman has a cross, a crescent, a Buddah and a star of David placed on her gravestone accepting them all as true and calling herself a true believer. Truth becomes diluted and threatened by a self-driven relativism. Because people say something is true seems to make it true, at least for them. Abe Lincoln once asked the question, “How many legs does a dog have if you call the tail a leg?” His answer: “Four, because calling a tail a leg doesn't make it a leg.”

So how does the church relate to a pagan society forever after elusive truth and reality? We can bash it, forgetting we're a part of it. We can dash from it, escaping to our own safe harbor. We can cash in and sell out, morphing truth in to opinion. Bash, dash, and cash. Or we can do what the church has always been sent to do – transform the world, testifying to the truth and reality of Jesus Christ.

For that task, that sending, there is no better model than Paul on Mars Hill in Athens. In Paul's day, Athens was no longer a great city, but it was still seen as a place of great ideas,

where truth was considered and tried by some of the brightest people anywhere. As Luke tells it in vs. 21, the Athenians were taken with just about any new idea. Newer was better. There in Athens we get a lesson in Christians transforming the culture. Let me walk you through the text.

First, notice at the start of vs. 16 that Paul was in Athens waiting for his traveling companions to catch up with him. Here is a rare occasion when Paul stands alone. *Sometimes Christians stand alone in witness.* So often our witness to the truth is one-on-one. It's a "Here I Stand" enterprise. And yet like Paul when we speak we are lifted by the prayers and encouragement of other Christians. When Paul spoke in Athens he had partners in the church across the Mediterranean world in prayer for him. He also had the grace of Jesus Christ. Paul knew the laws of rhetoric alright, but it's likely he was not all that engaging a speaker in person. Early depictions show him short, bald-headed, with a hooked nose. Yet there in Athens, the overwhelming number of idols and the grace of God made him speak, alone but not alone.

Second, notice in the opening verses of the text how *Paul was a player in his culture.* In vss. 17-19 we see Paul first in the synagogue, then in the marketplace, and then in the Areopagus, Paul was on the field, in the game. He didn't hurl missiles from the safety of his house church. He earned the right to be heard. He got outside the walls of the church and into the culture's debate. In a real sense, that's one of the reasons we're here, not to turn in on ourselves but to say a word to the culture, a word of real truth. We're meant to be players in our culture. That means we have a prophetic voice that needs to be heard. We have books that need to be written in the popular vernacular of our culture. Our theologians at our seminaries need to break outside the walls of academic theology into the world of public witness, testimony, and apologetics. Our pastors and lay leaders need to go where the culture's idols stand and where its longings are heard. The early church didn't circle its wagons. It charged into its culture with the truth of Jesus Christ.

Third, *we can expect to be misunderstood.* Paul was. They call him a "babbling" in vs. 18. The word actually means seed-picker. Today we might say, "bird brain." They were so taken up with idols, they thought he was introducing two new gods, Jesus and the Resurrection, taking the Greek word for resurrection, *Anastasis*, to be the name of another god. So Christians can expect to be called intolerant, exclusionary, duped, and out of touch. When Paul mentions the resurrection at the end of his speech, some sneer, others politely ask to hear more, and still others believe. We can expect different responses. Our task is to present, leaving the response to the Holy Spirit. One of the blessings of Ablaze! is its clear understanding that the results, the eternal yield of witness, are all a matter of God's grace.

Perhaps the most practical lesson we can take from Paul in Athens is *how he breaks open the cultural icons of his day and fills them full of new meaning, Christian meaning.* In vss. 22-23, Paul has spotted an altar with the inscription, "To an Unknown God" (Greek, *AGNOSTO THEO*), he says he will tell them about the god they do not know. And later in vs. 28, in making the point that since we are all created by God, God cannot be our creation, he chooses to quote well-known classic Greek poets, Epimenides, Aratus, and Cleanthus, loading their words with new Christian meaning. The church has always broken open the language of the culture and redefined it from a Christian perspective. The word, sacrament, for instance, was a secular word for a pledge of loyalty, recast by Christians to apply to Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the Lord's pledges of loyalty to us.

This breaking open of the culture's icons means we need to know our culture – its poetry, its books, its novels, its magazines, its art, its cartoons, its coffee shops. Our culture's language

and music and so much more are waiting to be broken open, interpreted, not giving them a spin, but filling them with truth from our Christian perspective. We have to know our culture. I spoke recently at a pastor's conference and said I had a list of 10 secular books published since 2000 that every pastor should read because they reveal our culture. Within a week I had received over 100 requests for the list. Pastors gets this.

A fifth lesson comes as we watch Paul present God as so much bigger, so much greater than the gods of the Athenians. Look at vs. 26-27. *The true God is bigger and more dangerous than the God and the truth of our culture.* Paul's God – and ours – establishes and moves nations according to his will and for the sake of his salvation plan. Then at vs. 29-31, we hear how Paul's God – and ours – raised Jesus from the dead and so made certain the urgent reality of a coming judgment. That looming judgment hovers over Paul's witness, giving it an authentically urgent character. Is that urgency here? Do we feel it? Do we see it on the horizon?

A sixth lesson comes with Paul's witness to the resurrection (vs. 31). *The truth and reality of Jesus ride on His resurrection.* In the end Paul's message was a message of eternal proportions, a truth, an historical reality corroborated by a risen Jesus Christ whom Paul himself had seen and heard. In the end the truth we speak, the truth we live and die for is the truth of Jesus Christ, his perfect life, his suffering in our place, his atoning death, and his return from death. This is Jesus who said, "I am the truth." This is Jesus whose life was not some fantasy, not some divine show in the mind of a writer, but Jesus in history, the real Jesus, exploding from death to life, still present among us here, here now, at a church convention! (Imagine that!)

In the end the truth we long for most is the truth that looks death in the eye and says, "Death, you are defeated. Death, you cannot have me!" In the end the truth about Jesus, the truth Jesus is, stands or falls on His resurrection. Even the spiritually shallow are taken by this basic tenet of our faith. As one wag put it, he wanted to be buried in Jerusalem because that city has the highest resurrection rate of any city in the world.

And finally, notice that at verse 34, *individuals matter in the record of the church's witness.* The flock increases one sheep at a time. Dionysius and Damaris are mentioned by name. The kingdom grows one by one. We can dream of movements, pray for the multitudes to know Jesus, but one by one they come in. Why? Because the church, set ablaze by the Spirit of God, speaks the truth, and grace works faith, faith in the One who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

Questions for Discussion

Where in our culture do you see self-focused, do-it-yourself truth at work?

When have you found yourself standing "alone" for the truths of your faith?

Where do you see opportunities for the church to "break open" cultural icons?

What keeps the LCMS from being a more visible player in our culture's debate of ideas and truths?

What aspect of Paul's witness in Athens is most significant for our church today?