

SERMON: IT'S TIME FOR A PROPER INTRODUCTION

Acts 17:22-28

(22) Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. (23) For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you. (24) God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that He is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; (25) Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, seeing He giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; (26) And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; (27) That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He be not far from every one of us: (28) For in Him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own have said, For we are also His offspring.

Introduction

In six hundred BC, the city of Athens, Greece, was in the grip of a terrible plague. Hundreds died. The city leaders consulted with a Pythian priestess, who was of course a pagan, to find out the source of the plague and why their sacrifices to the gods were having no effect. She told them maybe they were under a curse because of the treachery of King Megacles, who had promised amnesty to a group of rebels if they would surrender. When they surrendered, the king broke his word and killed them all.

The Athenians had sacrificed to every god they could think of, but the plague persisted. The pagan priestess said she sensed that there was another god to whom they should appeal. This feeling of another god who held the city accountable for the king's crime would not go away. The problem: She did not know His name. How do you pray or appeal to a god, when you don't know his name?

The pagan priestess admitted she needed help. She instructed the town council to send a delegation to the island of Crete and bring back a prophetic poet named Epimenides who may be better able to tell you how to appease this unknown deity.

Epimenides came to Athens as requested and instructed the council members to bring to the Areopagus a flock of hungry sheep. (The Areopagus is where the council held its meetings.) He further instructed them that half of the sheep were to be white and the other half black. In addition, he asked stonemasons to be present and to bring along a supply of stones and mortar.

At dawn of the next day, Epimenides prayed a humble prayer, acknowledging their pitiful ignorance of his name and asking the unknown God to look with compassion and forgiveness on the city. He prayed that this God would reveal His willingness to help and forgive by causing the sheep that pleased Him, black or white, to lie down on the grass instead of grazing, even though they were hungry.

After the prayer, the flock was released on the grassy hill. All of the black sheep lay down. All of the white sheep began to graze. The black sheep that lay down were considered holy and worthy to be a sacrifice to the unknown God. Each of the black sheep that lay was sacrificed to the unknown God on an altar the stonemasons immediately constructed on the very spot where the animal lay down. Some of these altars bore the inscription ***agnosto theo*** – “to an unknown God.” It was dumfounding to all observers that the black sheep were found worthy, but not the white sheep, because white sheep were considered more valuable than black sheep. (It is difficult, if not impossible, to dye black wool into various colors.)

According to Greek storytellers and historians, the plague began to lift the very next day. Within a week, the sick had recovered, and Athens was praising Epimendes’ unknown God. After six centuries, all they knew of this God was that he had forgiven Athens and removed the plague. It is debatable and speculative, but some theologians believe the God of the Bible heard Epimendes’ prayer, even though he did not know his name and was a pagan who had not been exposed to the Hebraic tradition.

The idea of unknown and unnamed gods motivated and frighten the Athenians. They became religiously paranoid. “What if there are other unknown gods? What if they get upset because we have not recognized them?” So, they built more altars to the unknown gods, just in case they missed one. These altars were an “insurance policy” against invoking the wrath of any slighted god or goddess whom, out of ignorance, they had neglected to worship.

While Paul was in Athens, he used the idea of the unknown god to segue into witnessing about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Paul affirmed that there was a

God of whom they had been ignorant. Paul took this witnessing and teaching moment to properly introduce them to This Unknown God. He made the unknown God, known to them.

Exposition

1. He Is The Only True And Living God.

(Monotheism – Not Polytheism.)

(He Is All You Need.)

(He Cannot Be Confined Only To Temples.)

(He Cannot Be Represented By Statues Of Stone, Gold Or Silver.)

2. He Created All Nations Out Of One Bloodline.

(The Greeks Thought They Were Superior.)

(He Will Respond To All Who Seek Him.)

3. He Is The Source And Sustainer Of All Life.

(In Him We Live, Move, And Have Our Being.)

(He Is An Ontological Necessity.)

Closing Thoughts

Like you, I am so glad I know Him. He knows me better than I know myself. He values me more than I value myself. He preserves me better than I can preserve myself.

End Notes

1. The word that the King James Version translates as superstitious means to be “religiously frightened” or “divinity-fearing.” They were constantly on pins and needles to make sure no small gesture or the absence of one would offend the gods and bring on a “divinely initiated misfortune.” So, in a sense, they were similar to people who are superstitious today. You know those who make sure they do not walk under a ladder, or

make sure they do not break a mirror, or don't let a black cat get in their path, or don't let a post come between them and a walking companion, or place a hat on a bed. Here's how I would translate that passage: "You are religiously paranoid and have still missed the One True Living God. Let Me tell you about Him."

2. Paul was meeting the Athenians where they were. That is practice of good evangelism. That is what God did. Jesus took on a human body to meet us at our level. The phrase, "In Him we live, and move, and have our being" is a citation from a poem by Epimenides. The phrase, "For we are His offspring" is a quotation from a poem by the Stoic philosopher, Aratus. A contemporary equivalent of Paul quoting these poets would be like taking a quote from ***Lift Every Voice and Sing***, or from King's ***I Have A Dream Speech***, or from one of Shakespeare's familiar lines. They could readily identify with the phrases.

3. Many of the early commentaries did not mention the Pythian priestess, Epimenides, or Aratus when explaining this Scripture. The writers' logic was not to give pagans too much "spiritual credit or credibility." In essence, they did not want to give them too much positive attention. Those who did mention them only did so in a tangential manner. This connection was almost lost in history and in theological discourses. It was the writing of William Barkley, who was versed in theology and in classic history and literature, who revived the knowledge of this connection. This makes you wonder: How many historical links, especially those of women and minorities, have become obscure or omitted because of personal preferences or personal prejudice?

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