

**BEING CHRISTIAN AMONG MANY FAITHS:
WAITING IN ATHENS**

Acts 17:16-34

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on May 4, 20008, the Seventh Sunday of Easter, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, ‘What does this babbler want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.’ (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.’ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.”

Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Earlier in this service we recited my favorite Prayer of Confession. It comes from the 1946 *Book of Common Worship* published by the Presbyterian Church.¹ Hear again the words we said earlier:

Eternal God, in whom we live and move and have our being; Whose face is hidden from us by our sin; And whose mercy we forget in the blindness of our hearts; Cleanse us, we beseech Thee, from all our offenses; And deliver us from proud thoughts and vain desires; That with lowliness and meekness we may draw near to Thee; Confessing our faults, confiding in Thy grace, and finding in Thee our refuge and our strength...

¹ The Board of Christian Education of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, *The Book of Common Worship* (Philadelphia: 1946), 53.

Though all phrases in this prayer are beautiful, the opening phrase most moves me: “Eternal God, in whom we live and move and have our being...” Whenever I choose a Prayer of Confession that I want to engulf us in comfort and hope, I choose this prayer.

You may have noticed this phrase – “in whom we live and move and have our being” – appears not only in our Prayer of Confession, but also in our scripture reading. The apostle Paul is in Athens, a major seat of Greco-Roman culture into which he travels as a missionary of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He is waiting in Athens for fellow missionaries Timothy and Silas to join him. Standing on a hill, in front of a statue of Ares, the Greek god of war, and next to the Acropolis, seat of the Athenian Supreme Court, Paul speaks to the religiously-diverse city into which he has traveled.

He compliments the Athenians on the fact of their worship life, even though he acknowledges that some of its form distresses him:

Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way [he says]. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.”

Paul then seeks common ground between the religious faith of the Athenians and his own Christian faith:

What...you worship as unknown [he says], this I proclaim to you: The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth... himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

Paul concludes by quoting two of their classical poets, Epimenides, who lived 600 years earlier, and Artaus, who lived 300 years earlier:

- “In him we live and move and have our being” [wrote Epimenides]
- “For we too are his offspring” [wrote Artaus].²

Think about this:

- Paul has taken this phrase that we recite in a prayer – “Eternal God, in whom we live and move and have our being” – from a religious culture different from the Judaism in which he was raised and the Christianity in which he was commissioned to preach.
- Paul has brought this phrase into the church for use in worship, teaching, preaching, and praying.
- With integrity to both, Paul has claimed this poetic phrase from another faith for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

“Eternal God, in whom we live and move and have our being.”

II.

What might such borrowing and adopting mean for us as individual Christians and for us as Westminster Presbyterian Church?

Theologically, it means this: If Paul can draw truth and beauty from something outside his faith, it says to us that our experiences – inside and outside the church, inside and outside *our* faith – can be sources that lead us to God.

- Everything that we see, touch, taste, hear, and smell in the culture around us can be brought into this house of God and claimed for Christian faith.
- Everything that we experience personally, professionally, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually can walk into the wide-open doors of Westminster Church, take a bulletin, sit down in a pew, sign a fellowship pad and can influence and be influenced by our faith and be claimed for Jesus Christ.

² Acts 17:28n in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

Even if what we experience comes from the realm of another faith, a realm indifferent to faith, a realm hostile to faith, we can bring what we experience into this house of worship and study, service and fellowship. We can grow in our faith because of what we have experienced outside it, even when that growth is painful.

III.

Like Paul in Athens, we live in a world of many faiths. As members and friends of Westminster Presbyterian Church, we seek to be Christian in this world. As you have heard in recent weeks, we at Westminster are defining our faith and our ministry for the next period of our life now that we have completed renovation of our facilities.

- Following worship today, I urge you to accept the invitation of our Envisioning Task Force, venture upstairs to the Haverkamp Room and take part in a town meeting.
- If you cannot stay today, plan to come May 19.
- Even if you are an officer who has already gone through this process, or a visitor to our church, come and join in!

As the Envisioning Task Force started their work, they asked me, as Pastor, to share a theological vision I have for our congregation. I was glad to be asked. As the last part of this sermon, I want to share with you today much of what I shared with the task force a few weeks ago. This material comes from John de Gruchy, a Reformed theologian from South Africa, whom I heard speak at a Reformed Institute event earlier this year. Please listen carefully.

De Gruchy puts forth a way of thinking about the Christian faith he calls *Christian humanism*.

[Christian humanism, he writes, is] a retrieval of Christianity's core theological convictions and moral values in ways that are critical of and yet constructively engaged with secular culture [It seeks to serve] the well-being of global humanity embedded in local contexts.

- Christian humanists affirm the integrity of creation, recognizing that human life is rooted in and dependent on the earth....Acknowledging the whole cosmos as God's creation, Christian humanists recognize that all of life is bound together in an amazingly complex evolutionary web that evokes humility and awe.
- Christian humanists believe that we share a common humanity with other human beings. We are human beings first, and then only Christian by choice. The biggest threat to the world derives from a refusal by so many, including many Christians, to honour this common humanity and therefore to respect difference.
- Christian humanists believe that we should join with secular humanists and people of other faiths in the struggle for human rights, freedom, dignity, justice and peace, and sustainable policies for the environment. Christian humanists nonetheless affirm a humanism that is *distinct* because it is *shaped* by faith in Christ. Being a Christian *humanist* implies that one is committed to human dignity; and being a *Christian* humanist suggests that these commitments and this hope are inseparable from one's faith in Jesus Christ.
- Christian humanists believe that the salvation we have in Christ is not about making us more religious but more fully human, reconciling relationships, restoring human wholeness and well-being, and unlocking potential and creativity. Central to this process of humanization is a spirituality rooted in the Bible, worship and prayer, a spirituality of struggle both personal and social for those things that make for genuine peace.
- Christian humanists believe that the Christian church is called to be a sign of the 'new humanity' God has brought into being through the death and resurrection of Christ; and therefore to live, act and hope in ways that contribute to human well-being in all its dimensions, countering the dehumanizing and depersonalizing tendencies of bad religion, secularism and scientism.
- Christian humanists today, like those of the past, have a love of learning in search of practical wisdom; a respect for difference yet a commitment to truth; a passion for justice and peace that transcends the confines of national loyalties; and a sensibility to the aesthetic that espouses beauty and encourages creativity. As such, Christian humanists, like those of the Renaissance, seek to relate Christian faith to the best in human culture, whether classical or cultural ... local or global...European or African or Asian.

de Gruchy concludes:

A radical humanism that affirms what is true, good, beautiful and human, and seeks the transformation of all that is false, bad, ugly and inhuman...represents a timely counter and alternative to the rampant secularism and religious fundamentalisms that surround us.³

It is risky to ready extended portions of a theological tract in a sermon. To those of you who stayed with me: thanks. To those of you who didn't: I understand. There will be other opportunities to digest these ideas and to "flesh out" in the life of our church what abstract words like "peace," "justice," "freedom," and "transcendence" mean.

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Athens was a fascinating place for Paul to be.

Despite the season of bad news
Through which our nation seems to be passing,
Ours is a fascinating time in which to be alive,
And Alexandria is a fascinating place to be.

We at Westminster Presbyterian Church
Have received the same good news Paul received:
The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

To place into creative tension with one another
That good news and *our* times
Is a terrific challenge.

Westminster is a congregation up to that challenge.
I invite you to be an increasing part of that effort.

Amen.

³ John W. de Gruchy, *Confessions of a Christian Humanist* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006], 30-32.