



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Where All Is New and Doubt Reigns Supreme

Acts 17:16-34

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Introduction

1. Donald Soper (1903-1998) was the first minister from his denomination to sit in the British House of Lords. But he was probably better known in Britain as an open-air or soap box preacher, going to various gathering places where he would preach and engage in dialogue with all comers.
2. In his essay, "The Setting for Making Christians Today," Soper noted specific ways Britain had changed from a culture that revolved around religion to one that was secular, notably:

[There is an] almost universal epidemic kind of doubt.... [where] the mood is not to regard Christianity as craftsmanship, but much more to regard it as craftiness. Consequently, before we can make any impression upon those to whom we seek to preach today, we have to recognize that they are already in a resistant frame of mind. They have been encouraged to think very largely in terms of doubt, and the more authoritatively we claim to speak, the more likely we are to produce an ambivalent, if not a contrary, effect to that which we desire. This is the outstanding characteristic of the hearer.¹

3. Soper wrote that in 1961, but since (as some have observed) many trends here follow England by a generation or so, it should not surprise us to find we face the same attitudes.

Communicating the Christian faith has become extremely complicated in our day. There are very few accepted beliefs any more. Never before has skepticism had such a brilliant halo around its head. There is a glory about "not knowing." A high premium is placed on the absence of conviction, and open-mindedness has become synonymous with intellectual sophistication.²

4. Recent reports from the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) at Trinity College in Hartford, CT quantify the trend: the percentage of people who call themselves Christian has dropped 11% since 1990 with the "no religion" category increasing from 8% to 15%.³
 - a. In Tennessee, both the percentage of Catholics and "other religions" (Jews, Muslims, eastern religions, and new religious movements such as Wiccan) has increased 2%.

¹ Donald Soper, "The Setting for Making Christians Today," in George Hunter, ed., *Focus on Evangelism: Readings for Thinking It Through*, 76

² Ravi Zacharias, *A Shattered Visage: The Real Face of Atheism*, 2.

³ To download a pdf. of the report, see <http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/publications/2008-2/aris-2008-summary-report/> Accessed March 16, 2018.

- b. Those who say they have “no religion” and those who “don’t know” increased by 3%.
 - c. Meanwhile, other Christian religions have decreased by 11%.⁴
5. Not surprisingly, those most skeptical of religious faith are delighted to hear this and are encouraged that recent efforts to win converts to their views are being rewarded.
 - a. Richard Dawkins, whose book, *The God Delusion* was on the *New York Times* best seller list for months (it was # 21 on the paperback non-fiction list as of March 20, 2009).
 - b. Christopher Hitchens, whose *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* has also spent considerable time as a best seller. (Hitchens followed up with a book of readings from atheists through the ages, *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever*.)
 - c. Sam Harris, author of *Letter to a Christian Nation*, which the *New York Observer* said “makes a good case for a new and intellectually honest conversation about morality and human suffering” (from the reviews on Amazon.com’s page for the book).
6. While some reviews that appeared in secular publications were critical of these books,⁵ their popular-level approach found an audience and continues to exert influence beyond the ivory tower of academia.
7. That we should respond should be obvious.
 - a. To reinforce our own faith; this is among the things we should believe and be able to prove (1 Thessalonians 5:21) and defend (2 Peter 3:15).
 - b. For the sake of our children who, if they do not hear us offer a reasonable defense of our faith may well conclude that we have no defense.⁶
 - c. For the sake of responding to those we meet who are genuinely investigating and are open to hearing and weighing our arguments.
8. But what should be the nature of our response? In the recognition that Christians have faced this challenge before, let us look for some insight from Paul.⁷

Body

I. Where Paul Was (Acts 17:16-21).

A. What real parallels are there between ancient Athens and the 21st century West?

1. Consider a few summary statements from New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger.⁸
 - a) “When [the earliest followers of Jesus] carried the message of Christianity to cities and villages throughout the Mediterranean world, they encountered a wide spectrum of philosophies and religions in the Greco-Roman world.”
 - b) “Genuine belief in the reality of the ancient gods and goddesses of classical mythology had long since given way to widespread agnosticism.”

⁴ The state statistics are from http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-03-09-ARIS-faith-survey_N.htm. Accessed March 25, 2009; March 16, 2018.

⁵ Stephen Prothero, in a review from *The Washington Post* posted at Amazon.com, comments, “What Hitchens gets wrong is religion itself.... *God Is Not Great* assumes a childish definition of religion and then criticizes people for believing such foolery.”

⁶ Scientist William Cairney reported doing exactly that, leading to several years of confusion before he came in contact with some Christians who offered a defense. See his essay, “The Value of an Evidential Approach,” in John Warwick Montgomery, ed., *Evidence for Faith: Deciding the God Question*, pp. 15-22.

⁷ This approach assumes the truth of 2 Timothy 3:17, that God’s word can “equip us for every good work.”

⁸ Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth and Content*, 3rd Edition, Revised and Enlarged, 73-74.

- c) "Though rationalism had destroyed the foundations for belief, the pendulum swung for many from skepticism toward credulity. The growth of superstition and astrology, the consultation of horoscopes and omens, the use of amulets and charms, the honor given to exorcists and charlatans of all kinds who preyed upon the gullible—such was the understandable reaction to a crude and skeptical materialism."
- d) "Though the old deities were dead, devotees of the exotic mystery religions brought new gods to the Greco-Roman world from the East.... Many persons,... were initiated into several of these cults,..."
- 2. Luke specifically mentions "the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers" among those who questioned Paul (he will quote from the Stoics in v 28).
 - a) The Epicureans were followers of Epicurus (342-270 bc).
 - (1) Epicurus "held that the senses, as the one and only source of all our ideas, provided the sole criterion of all truth" (Metzger, 75).
 - (2) He believed "the world is a series of fortuitous combinations of atoms..."⁹ with death bringing their final dispersion (Metzger, 75) (cf. Acts 17:32).
 - (3) He believed that "man's wisdom lies in the pursuit of pleasure, which Epicurus equated with freedom from pain and from fear, a state one attains by the avoidance of excesses of all kinds" (Metzger, 75).
 - (4) He believed that, if the gods did exist, they were detached from and had nothing to do with human existence (Metzger, 75).
 - b) The Stoics' were named for the porch (*stoa*) where their founder Zeno (336-263 bc) lectured.
 - (1) Zeno "encouraged the development of religious and moral fiber" and stressed that divine Reason "pervaded the whole of the material order" (Metzger, 75-76).
 - (2) His essential teaching was "that people should be free from excessive joy or grief and submit without complaint to necessity" (Louw-Nida, 11.97).
 - (3) Without a personal, self-revealing God, the Stoics never made "a religious appeal to the masses" (Metzger, 76).
- 3. Add to these summaries Luke's description in verse 21.

B. With regard to both license and morality Athens was secular. It was also sophisticated; and pluralistic.

II. What Paul Did.

- A. He took the time to know their world through observation not assumptions (vv 16, 23).
- B. He reasoned (*διαλέγομαι*, *dialogomai*) with the different groups (v 17).
 - 1. "To engage in speech interchange, converse, discuss, argue."¹⁰
 - 2. He went where they were and was prepared to engage the people he met.
- C. He looked for common ground and began there (v 22).
 - 1. He apparently did not go on the attack.
 - 2. He acknowledged the good things he could about them and their views (vv 22-23).

⁹ Johannes E. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), BibleWorks, v.10.

¹⁰ Frederick W. Danker, ed & rev., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd Edition, 232.

3. He presented his case based on the evidence for it, not assertions (vv 23-28), showing how the conclusions applied to them.

D. He understood that they had the freedom to accept or reject his message (vv 32-34).

III. What Paul Said (17:22-31).

- A. Paul's approach reminds me of the story a teacher told about the Christian who found himself seated next to an atheist on an airplane. Challenged about his belief in God, the Christian replied, "Tell me about the god you don't believe in. I may not believe in him either."
- B. Paul's understanding that they were religious and had wrong views of God directed the first part of his message.
 1. He explained the Christian view of God (vv 24-26).
 2. He then explained how humanity's nature leads us to seek that kind of God (vv 27-28).
 3. Only then did he press his point that God was not an idol (v 29).
- C. He went beyond the philosophical idea of God's existence to stress vital truths about Jesus.
 1. The story of Jesus is excellent evidence for the truth and nature of God (v 18 - "divinities"; vv 18, 31 - the resurrection; and v 31 - "appointed" [see Rom 1:4]).
 2. In stressing the resurrection, he introduced the idea of a future life, accountability, and therefore meaning for our existence (v 31).
- D. After teaching these truths, he spoke of their accountability before God (v 31).

Conclusion

1. Asked to explain why the longest article in the 55-volume *Great Books of the Western World* is on God, co-editor Mortimer Adler said, "It is because more consequences for life follow from that one issue than from any other" (in Zacharias, 12).
2. Ravi Zacharias elaborates: "Nothing, absolutely nothing, has a more direct bearing on the moral choices made by individuals or the purposes pursued by society, than belief or disbelief in God.... It is not accidental that the key issues of the day that are felt with deep emotion and conviction, whether it be the issue of sexual orientation and practice, or life in the fetal stage, sooner or later filter down to whether there is a God, and if so, has He spoken?" (Zacharias, 12).
3. Historically, Christians have answered, not by calling people to "just believe," but by engaging them with the evidence for why we believe our convictions are true and meaningful.
4. Now is not the time to shy away from that tradition. We need at least a brief review of the evidence to reinforce our faith, to give us the framework for helping our children, friends, co-workers, and neighbors understand why we believe, and encourage one another as we live out the implications of what we claim to believe.
5. Ultimately, belief is always about life. What do you believe, and how are you living today?

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