



# THE BEREA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

## Thinking Matters

Concerning Jesus’ teaching on worry in Matthew 6.25-34, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote:

“Faith according to the Lord’s teaching in this paragraph, is primarily thinking; and the whole trouble with a man of little faith is that he does not think. . . . Look at the birds, think about them, and draw your deductions. Look at the grass, look at the lilies of the field, consider them. . . . Faith . . . is a man insisting upon thinking when everything seems determined to bludgeon and knock him down in an intellectual sense. The trouble with the person of little faith is that, instead of controlling his own thought, his thought is being controlled by something else, and, as we put it, he goes round and round in circles. That is the essence of worry. . . . That is not thought; that is the absence of thought, a failure to think.” ~ *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, II: 129-130; quoted in John R. W. Stott, *Your Mind Matters*, 2nd ed. (IVP Books, 2006), 54-55.

“Historian Daniel Boorstin has written that our modern capacity for instant, total information has produced ‘*homo up-to-datum*,’ but *homo up-to-datum* is a dunce.” ~ Os Guinness, *Unriddling Our Times* (1999), 9

## Strangers and Exiles (1)

David Anguish

Desiring to protect their beloved leader Polycarp, the church sent him into hiding. In frustration, the pursuing “multitude . . . began shouting [to the proconsul], ‘Away with the atheists! Find Polycarp!’” They did and, in deference to his age, the proconsul gave him the chance to “repent,” swear allegiance to Caesar, and “say, ‘Away with the atheists!’” Polycarp said it, but not like the proconsul wanted. Looking at the assembled crowd, he “motioned toward them with his hand, and then . . . said, ‘Away with the atheists!’”<sup>1</sup>

Dismissing opponents with pejorative terms is hardly unusual, but how in the world could anyone ever describe Christians as *atheists* (*atheos*)?

As Larry Hurtado showed, the answer begins with knowing that “God” (*theos*) meant something different in the ancient world than it does in the modern West. After twenty centuries of Christian influence, we use “God” monotheistically to refer to “the supernatural creator and overseer of the universe.” But in the ancient world there were, in Hurtado’s words, “gods galore” and many words for gods—including, but not limited to, *theos*—that “designated . . . a veritable cafeteria of divine beings of various orders, attributes, and functions.”<sup>2</sup>

When Christians joined the Jews in declaring that there was just one *theos* and the traditional gods had “no real existence” (1 Cor 8.4), three outcomes resulted. First, their neighbors found their view *unintelligible*; they simply could not comprehend the idea of “only one God.”

Second, their neighbors found their view *intolerable*, especially since many Christians took “a rather critical stance against devotion to the many deities of the time,” insisting that there was only one God “to whom alone worship was rightfully due.”<sup>3</sup> This is what led to the “atheist” epithet: as their neighbors saw it, Christians did not believe in the gods.

## Words, Words, Words

"If ever a generation needed a prophetic word, it is ours. Words, words, words—we are assaulted from all sides by words, but we are starved from a word from God. Blaring, blasting, hectoring, seducing, words come at us from all sides today—on billboards, bumper stickers, newspapers, television, and junk mail [and now the internet and social media-DA]. But few modern words are decisive; they do not make things happen. Most are only accessories to images and accomplices to sales. And almost none—including sermons—bear any trace of transcendent source or the sign of a wind from heaven. Prophets tear through social complacency and moral rottenness like bolts of lightning. But such occurrences are rare today as modern people sleep untroubled beneath a million lightning rods." ~ Os. Guinness, ed., "Introduction," *Unriddling Our Times: Reflections on the Coming Cultural Crisis* (Baker Books, 1999), 9

## Food with Substance

"If we feed ourselves only on proof texts, role models, types, and 'thoughts for the day,' we restrict our ability to know God, for only proper interpretation will bring the full benefit of God's self-revelation. If God has truly spoken, it is incumbent on us as his creatures to get so absorbed in his Word that it becomes second nature to us. It can convict us, challenge us, and confront us as long as we discharge our responsibility to study the Scriptures conscientiously." ~ Andrew E. Hill & John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Zondervan, 2009), 30

Third, many disciples became *cultural separatists*, withdrawing from the interactions and customs woven into a society where regular expressions of devotion to the many gods were pervasive. For example, visitors to a typical Roman home were expected to join in expressing their devotion to the deities believed to protect that house.<sup>4</sup> Civic ceremonies typically included ritual devotions to gods who were believed to protect the respective cities. Several deities were associated with the Roman imperial state to which loyalty was gauged by one's expression of devotion. The same was true of trades, guilds, and military units, all of whom had patron deities and whose meetings typically included ritual ceremonies to honor them. Many formal dinners with the same expectation took place in temples devoted to gods who were often designated as the ones extending the invitations to the dinners.

As Hurtado summarized in a different book,

In short, birth, death, marriage, the domestic space, civil and wider political life, trades and work, the military, socializing, entertainment, arts, and music, were all imbued with religious significance and association with various kinds of divine beings. . . .

A refusal to take part in the religious ceremonies of household, guild, or city would have aroused puzzlement, even suspicion, resentment and anger from other pagans. An unwillingness to join in daily acknowledgment of the guardian spirits in the home would likely have been regarded by others in the home as registering some sort of disloyalty to the household. . . .<sup>5</sup>

Jesus' followers were thus rendered "strangers and exiles" (1 Pet 2.11 CSB) and often viewed with hostility. As we consider current events and trends, we will be wise to think more about their experience and what we can learn from it for living in the world ours is becoming.

*www.davidanguish.com*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 3.2; 9.2; in Michael W. Holmes, ed. & trans., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* 3rd. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 310-311, 316-317.

<sup>2</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *God in New Testament Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 27-28. Hurtado also notes that the ancient view of "gods" exists "in large parts of the current world as well."

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>4</sup> We should note the difficulty this would have created for family members and slaves who converted to Christ and had to live in those homes.

<sup>5</sup> Hurtado, *Why On Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?* The Père Marquette Lecture in Theology 2016 (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2016), 75, 78.

*All Scripture quotations not otherwise designated are from the ESV.*

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