



THE BEREIA PAGE

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

Worship Sermons Book Available

“All human wisdom consists in this alone, the knowledge and worship of God” (Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 3.30).

The above statement exemplifies the depth of thought about worship found in Christian writings that have survived from the time before Christianity became the official religion of Rome. It is one of several on the subject of worship collected by Everett Ferguson in his book, *Inheriting Wisdom: Readings for Today from Ancient Christian Writers* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2004; p. 232).

I use Lactantius’s statement as the opening line in the Introduction to a volume of collected sermons on worship originally prepared a decade ago. Entitled, *The Glory Due His Name*, the digital book (ca. 160 pp.) consists of thirty sermons on worship in three parts:

- The importance of worship
- The attitude and approach we bring to worship
- The actions we perform when we come together to worship

Five supplemental chapters of related materials are also included.

Click [here](#) to find previews of the table of contents and other excerpts and purchase information.

A City with Many Gods

David Anguish

In the early 1980s, a friend recommended Howard Snyder’s 1975 book, *The Problem of Wineskins: Church Structure in a Technological Age*. His subtitle indicates that Snyder thought that the church was living in a different world than the one it had faced previously. But it’s hard to believe he could have imagined how different the “technological age” he wrote about would look forty-five years later.

One part of his book that has stood the test of time is his overview of areas of correspondence between the ancient world and ours. We might want to adjust some particulars, but his list of seven items remains generally helpful.

1. An essentially urban world with cities playing a major cultural role.
2. Unparalleled peace, stability and political unity.
3. The worldwide spread of one predominant culture and language.
4. International travel, communication and cultural interchange.
5. Widespread social change, with a tendency toward a humanizing, universalist, “one world” outlook; a feeling that mankind is essentially one and shares a common destiny.
6. Widespread religious and philosophical unrest; the mixture and relativization of worldviews; the rise of new religions, a practical atheism and disbelief in the gods, along with a focus on personal existence and mysticism.
7. Moral degeneration.¹

Snyder’s list reminds us that it is important to be historically aware. However different our current situation may be from that of our most recent ancestors, God’s people have faced similar circumstances before, not least at the very beginning of Christ’s community when the disciples were a vastly outnumbered minority proclaiming an alien perspective as they vied for a seat at a crowded ideological table.

Paul’s mission in Athens is a helpful case study. By the time he visited the city, it had been surpassed as a great urban

Remember

“The twin commands to ‘remember’ and ‘do not forget’ are the indispensable bookends of biblical faith. ‘Judaism is a religion of memory. . . . Memory is a moral tutorial,’ Rabbi Sacks insists, quoting George Santayana’s famous maxim, ‘Those who cannot remember the past are destined to repeat it.’” (Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation—Exodus: The Book of Redemption* [New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2010], 93; George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, vol. 1, *Reason in Common Sense* [New York: Scribner’s, 1905], 284) — Os Guinness, *Carpe Diem Redeemed: Seizing the Day, Discerning the Times* (InterVarsity Press, 2019), 91

Important and Practical

“To be sure, the study of Scripture requires diligence—in other words, work!—but what ought to motivate our efforts is the payoff at the end of our research: a better understanding of the history, literature, and theology of the NT writings for the purpose of cultivating, in the power of the Holy Spirit, a deeper spiritual life in ourselves, our families, and our churches. This, in turn, will result in a more authentic and authoritative proclamation of the biblical message so that God’s kingdom may be advanced in this world and so others may be subjected to his reign in their lives.” — Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, & Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, The Cross, and The Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (B&H Academic, 2009), xv

center by cities such as Syrian Antioch, Ephesus, Alexandria, Rome, and Corinth. Five hundred years of political and military setbacks had made Athens “a ‘provincial backwater,’ a small university town more concerned with ideas than commerce,” though in the mid-first century AD it was experiencing “a brief resurgence of building activity.”²

Athens was intellectually pluralistic. Although monotheism was represented with the presence of a Jewish synagogue and God-fearers, its influence was small. Luke’s declaration that “the city was full of idols” did not overstate matters (Acts 17.16). As he walked around, Paul could view Greek statutes and temples built five centuries before. Most notable was Athena, the patron goddess of Athens, but “every deity of the Greek pantheon was [also] worshiped there.” So too were gods from Asia Minor, Rome, Persia, Anatolia, Egypt, and Syria. The Roman imperial cult also had a significant presence.³ This variety led the satirist Petronius to say that “it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens.”⁴

Also present were the Greek philosophers. Luke singled out the Epicureans and Stoics (Acts 17.18), but the general Greek outlook was also pronounced, as evidenced by the reaction to Paul’s teaching about the bodily resurrection (Acts 17.18-19, 32), an idea both foreign and repugnant to the Greeks’ dualistic view of human nature.⁵

Paul saw the situation as an opportunity, not a threat. But, he did not use the same approach in Athens he had used in other places. He engaged the Athenians in the marketplace of ideas and found the common ground he shared with them even as he remained true to the fundamental message of the gospel.

His approach has much to teach us and deserves more thought and elaboration.

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Notes

¹ Howard Snyder, *The Problem of Wineskins: Church Structure in a Technological Age* (InterVarsity Press, 1975), 27-33.

² John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Baker Academic, 1991), 299-300; “provincial backwater” is cited from T. Leslie Shear, Jr., “Athens: From City State to Provincial Town,” *Hesperia* 50 (1981): 372.

³ Clinton E. Arnold, “Acts,” *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, vol. 2, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Zondervan, 2002), 386, 388.

⁴ McRay, 304.

⁵ Arnold, 388, 391.

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