

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
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Preaching to the Already Religious
(or, Proposing a Prepositional Posture to the Preposterously Propositional¹)

Exodus 20.1-17; Acts 17.16-34

Russ Dean, April 27, 2008

There was a church on every street corner. Popular music, filled with religious themes and images, floated in the air. In the market places, the hubbub was enlivened by headlines in religious jargon. And in the streets, the conversation among colleagues and friends inevitably turned theological. It was a religious time. They were a religiously intoxicated people.

Can you name the city and time? Let me give you a multiple choice. Was it A) Athens, Greece, 1st Century CE? Or, B) Charlotte, NC, 2008? (...a church on every corner... religious music in the air... religious headlines... theological conversations ...) Athens? or Charlotte?

The answer: Yes! (Both.)

The first century of this era was a religious time. And it was populated by a religiously intoxicated people. The Apostle Paul roamed about this city, which was one of the greatest in the ancient world – and one to which we are still indebted. Athens was the birthplace of democracy, and one of the early cities to provide an ethos in which art and architecture could flourish. It was a cosmopolitan city which fostered cultural and intellectual growth and diversity. It was by many measures a modern metropolis – lacking only the industrial and technological advances which we arrogantly (but probably falsely) claim as our progress over these ancient people. And in such an environment – a society no longer devoted solely to its survival – a self-conscious and

¹ In my introductory remarks I commented, especially for any guests, that I offered this alternate title for my congregation, knowing my propensity to use “multi-syllabic” words, essentially as a good-nature joke. As I began writing the sermon, I had little intention of using this alliteration in the sermon’s content. It did sneak in, however, and I received two thoughtful critiques that my cleverness had overshadowed the message. To the extent this is true, I failed this important text of scripture and the message I tried to bring.

spiritually-aware people began devoting their time and passion to the pursuit of what was once called “the queen of the sciences” – that is, to theology, “the study of God.”

As Paul traveled the city, he found marks of Athenian piety, religious observance, supernatural curiosity everywhere. He had probably read the ancient writer, Pausanias, who would have told him that Athens “surpassed all other states in the attention which [its people] paid to the worship of the gods.”² At every turn were “temples, altars, and other sacred buildings.”³ And, this being a polytheistic, pagan culture, there were statues everywhere to... the gods. Imagine Paul, raised in observant, monotheistic Judaism, a Pharisee converted to become the world’s leading Christian apologist, walking among these idols. Though he strongly disagreed with their philosophies, he was so religious himself there must have been a fascination for him, if a disturbing fascination, with the Athenian obsession for worship, obeisance, paying homage to their deities.

As he made his way through the city he found statues to every one of the gods. Even though I think if Paul as being too self-righteous to allow even a condescending grin as he passed, and the scripture makes clear his disdain, I can’t help but think there may have been a pious chuckle in his throat when he came upon that statue. Nothing could have better represented their obsession, their uneasy fear, their superstition – for just in case they had left out a god, not willing to take the chance of invoking some divine wrath, the Athenians had created a statue, also, for a divinity (that may not have even existed!) The statue paid tribute to an unknown god!

To say the Athenians were religious, as you can see, would be an understatement. The Greek word Paul uses to describe their obsessive worship is fascinating. It took me three sources to correctly track it down, but the word is: *deisidaimonia*. It is translated “religion” or “piety” –

² *The Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, “Athens,” John P. Newport, p. 74.

³ *ibid.*

but it can also connote “superstition,” and we can see this as we break the word down into its component parts. *Deisi* comes from a verb meaning “to fear,” and *daimonia* is from the word which is translated both “god” (lower case “g”) and (can you hear it? – *daimon*) – “demon.” Paul says these people were obsessed with religion – that is, the worship of the gods... or the fear of the demons. The word religion, which refers to the practice of the Love of God, can also convey a superstitious fear of idols. And religion and superstition are not just etymological cousins (that is, it’s not just that these words are related to each other), but religion, even in the practice of good-hearted, well-intentioned people can subtly, but quickly, be transformed into an excessive form of fearful idolatry, which is too often not recognized as the destructive superstition that it is.

That was Athens. And what about Charlotte?

There was a church on every corner... A little informal internet research tells me that our fair city, which has been known as the “city of churches,” was home to 64 congregations in 1903 – and more than 700 houses of faith today. Charlotte’s plentiful religious expressions span the Christian spectrum and includes Friends, Unitarian Universalists, Sikhs, Hindus and practitioners of the Baha’i tradition, to mention only a few.

Popular music, filled with religious themes and images, floated in the air... There are a handful of “Christian Contemporary” stations competing for air play on your radio. And... have you listened to a country station for five minutes in the last few years? I won’t venture a guess, but it seems that every other song with a drawl and a twang I hear these days combines some clever mix of pickup trucks, blue jeans, and divorce with angels, miracles and, in one (usually) poorly theological way or another, a reference to the Almighty!

In the market places, the hubbub was enlivened by headlines in religious jargon. I dare you to find a single newspaper or magazine in the next week that does not feature at least one

article whose substance is religious in nature. The language may be so common these days that you are not even aware of it.

And in the streets, the conversation among colleagues and friends inevitably turns theological. When is the last time you had one, not in church? Our current presidential race is amazing and absolutely fascinating to me. By listening to the news and talk shows, you would sometimes think we were in the process of electing a national prophet, not a secular political leader – and the religious themes of this campaign invariably spill into our daily conversations.

Indeed... It is a religious time. And we are a religiously intoxicated people. For a pastor, it is a time of fascination and hope – and of more than a little unease, for the question for such a religious people is if our religion really represents a practice of loving of God, or if it is actually more akin to a superstitious fear of the gods we make of our religion.

In his own way, Jesus was always asking this question. Recognizing the power and importance of religion, Jesus was also ever-mindful of religion's destructive, too-easily abused power. And Jesus, not unlike other great spiritual leaders, provoked controversy because he seemed so comfortable with those people who were externally non-religious. (As if he actually found something spiritual in them. Imagine that!) And he provoked discomfort to the Church because he seemed often offended by those who presented themselves as the most religious. And he seemed almost to enjoy using their own religion as the sharpest critique against them. I think the great Reformer, John Calvin, was right when he said “the human mind is a perpetual factory of idols,”⁴ and I believe the propositions of religion are a tantalizing target for a religious age, which the overly religious too often mold into idols they were never intended to be.

⁴ I do not have a reference for this quotation that I picked up in someone else's sermon along the way.

In such a religious time, among such religious people, propositions fly high. And our propositions are important. We need to continue to teach the Ten Commandments to our children. We need to teach the tenets of Christian theology, our beliefs concerning God, Jesus, the Spirit, the Church, humanity, sin and salvation, etc... But what is important, finally, is not just that we teach our children that these propositions are important – but that we teach them why these commandments and statements of belief are important – and that is because of what they can mean for our relationships.

The experiences of our lives, especially those which we deem to be spiritual experiences, beckon to be told. And in order for some deep experience of the spirit to be shared, we necessarily reach for symbols, and those symbols must further be clarified by words. This movement, from experience to words, is how spiritual experiences give birth to doctrines, how beliefs become propositions.⁵ And as long as these words continue to point people to the experiences that gave them birth, they will be life-giving words. For example...

As long as we can remember that the prohibition against adultery is given to nurture the relationship between two committed people, that this relationship is what is important, those words will bring life. But as soon as “*thou shalt not*” becomes only a religious proposition, those who are just a little too religious will start treating it as some kind of idol. Defining what it is,

⁵ In his book, *The Soul of Christianity*, Huston Smith argues that all doctrines are the codification, in words, of the experiences of the early church. This has been an important insight for me, and has given me new understanding into our doctrines, some of which I have been willing to take issue with, purely intellectually. Trinity, for example, came to the Christian church as people shared their experiences of God as distant, powerful, and mysterious (Creator), also, in Jesus, as personal, tangible, and suffering (Redeemer), and also, after Jesus’ death, as spirit, peace, closer-than-our-breath (Sustainer). When Trinitarian doctrine is taken as purely “propositional,” many Christians find it difficult to support, intellectually. (Is this three gods or one?, etc...) But understood, experientially, these same realities are available to believers today, i.e., God as distant, incarnate (in one another as well as in the story of Jesus), and internal.

exactly. And determining what it is not. (And what they can get away with!) And when they have formed it to their own liking, they will start using this proposition as a weapon.

So, Jesus would find a preposterously propositional people, and have to explain: *you have heard that it was said, you shall not commit adultery* (a proposition)... *but I say to you that anyone whose heart has lusted, is guilty...* (Matthew 5.28) Can't you just hear their religious rejection of Jesus' foolish words? (Probably because they all had lusted in their hearts!) "Lust and adultery are two entirely different things, Jesus!" Well, yes, they are. I suppose I don't need to explain in detail how lust and adultery differ. But Jesus was trying to tell them that when they are taken "prepositionally," these two very different propositions have the same effect. Let me explain.

Do you remember your prepositions from grammar school? On, in, above, below, of, around, beside, beneath... By definition, a preposition is "a word [which indicates] the relation of a substantive word in a sentence to the verb."⁶ (Or, as I learned it from a class mate, it tells what you can do to a chair: you can sit on a chair, in a chair, above a chair, beside a chair, below a chair, etc...) Prepositions are about relationships.

It seems to me, from my own observation, the more religious people become, the more propositional they tend to get. And the more propositional we become in our religion – Christianity is defined as this and this and this... the less we can maintain the prepositional nature our statements of faith originally intended – to be a follower of Jesus is to maintain a certain kind of relationship with God, a certain kind of relationship with others, a certain kind of relationship with one's deepest self.

I know that I am swimming upstream. It is a religious day, and people around the world are in a highly religious mood. Fundamentalism in every religion demands indoctrination, the

⁶ *The American Heritage College Dictionary.*

passing on of propositions. And propositions define, and delineate. Such a definition of religion will serve mostly, in the end, to separate us – into increasingly smaller, and more distant groups. But the English word religion (if you can tolerate one more etymology!), comes from a Latin word which is related to our word, ligament. A ligament connects a muscle to a bone. And religion is supposed to connect, not separate. I believe when rightly understood, religion has the power, like perhaps nothing else, to connect all people.⁷

When Paul had his opportunity to address the Athenians, he passed up the chance to lecture them on the propositions of a new religion on the world scene. Instead, he introduced them to a person. At its core, Christianity is not a set of propositions. It is not the Ten Commandments. Christianity is not defined by Paul's New Testament doctrine. It is not contained by the orthodoxy of the fourth century councils, which gave us our traditional doctrines.⁸ At its heart, Christianity is about introducing people to Jesus – who by his life introduces them to a particularly compelling God. A God who is knowing. A God who dares to be known. Christianity introduces people to Jesus, and invites them to consider life as an exciting, prepositional adventure!

Paul did not define Christianity for the Athenians in propositions. Instead, he used a preposition, which says it all: “In”... *In God we live... In God we move... In God we (all) have our being...* In God, we are all related.

To a preposterously propositional people, Paul proposed a prepositional posture!

Can you imagine what a difference it would make to our world if the primary posture of religion was promoting relationships, not creating rules? What difference would it make to your

⁷ The irony, and often tragedy of religion, is that it also has the power, unlike anything else, to separate people!

⁸ The intellectual tenets of Christian faith may be contained “in” the fourth century councils, but my point is that Christian faith cannot be defined and contained, solely, by any statement of propositions.

own life? If God were truly in your work? In your family? In your marriage? What would it mean?

I know, because my English teachers, and my grammatically-aware father have told me thousands of times... you are not supposed to end a sentence with a preposition,⁹ but today's sermon hasn't exactly been about following the expected rules, either, so I'm going to do just that – because I need to end by saying, regardless the rules of religion, when it comes to true faith, prepositions, and not propositions, is what it's all about.

May it be so!

⁹ Though I've had a small handful of English teachers to tell me this rule has now been relaxed, in favor of speaking sentences that are not structurally awkward. ("This is a sermon, up with which I will not put," is apparently no longer the preferred syntax!)