

Sixth Sunday of Easter

IDOL WORSHIP

Acts 17:22-31

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Analysis by Bill White

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23 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. 24 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, 25 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. 26 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, 27 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. 28 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.'

29 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. 30 While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 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.”

DIAGNOSIS: Clinging to Idols

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Worshipping Idols*

It is true that the Athenians are “extremely religious” (v. 22). Paul has observed that the city of Athens is full of idols (v. 16), statues and temples created by human beings. In fact, just to cover all their bases, the Athenians even have an altar “to an unknown god” (v. 23). Paul sees clearly the Athenians problem: They worship false idols, false gods.

And how about us today? While Americans may not literally “worship” in temples before statues of gods like Athena and Ares (Mars), while we may not serve those kinds of false gods, what are the idols of our devotion? On what do we spend most of our time, our money, our energy, our devotion? What about the gods of profit as an absolute value and success by the world’s standards at any cost? What about the way our culture has made an idol out of individual freedom, and how it is that this has led to the breakdown of the family, rampant materialism, careerism, and the idolization of physical beauty and romantic love? It is true that we Americans are “extremely religious” and are devoted to our idols.

What is more, is this not true also for many in our culture who consider themselves to be Christians? Are there not churches in America today filled with what has been called “soft, secular Christians,” folks who cling to their materialistic, self-centered way of life but add a little Jesus to it, worshipping not the Jesus of sacred scripture and the orthodox faith, but a Jesus of their own creating who blesses their way of life? Are not our churches filled with folks who are leading little-better

lives than they used to live and certainly better than their unchurched neighbors, folks paying lip service to believing in Jesus, but whose faith in reality is not in Jesus Christ but in their financial prosperity, and/or their faith is in their ability to acquire and maintain romantic love, and/or in their ability to acquire and maintain family love, and/or in their perceived power and/or political success?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Faith in Idols*

Even worse, this worship of false idols is based on misplaced faith. The Athenians' faith is in these gods made by human hands, and with their lives they serve these idols. Paul reminds them that even some of their own poets have acknowledged there must be one Creator God of whom we are offspring. He says to them, "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" (v. 29). Yet it is upon these false idols that most Athenians would continue to hang their hearts.

And today, as Christian Law and Gospel is proclaimed in our culture and churches, do not most hearers cling fiercely to faith in their idols? Has not sin so affected our hearts that our basic motivational drives become the idols we worship?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Ignorance No Longer an Excuse*

Matters are worse still for most of these Athenians as only a few took Paul's words to heart. Paul proclaimed, "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" (vv. 30-31). In spite of this word from the Lord, most of Paul's audience turned away. Some of them

even mocked him (vv. 32-34).

So also in our culture. God continues to command all people to repent, because the man whom God appointed, Jesus Christ, will one day judge the world in righteousness. Ignorance is certainly no longer an excuse, especially in the churches where Law and Gospel have been proclaimed for generations. And the Word continues to be proclaimed; yet the people do not repent of the idols. And like Paul, those who proclaim this message are often mocked and rejected.

PROGNOSIS: REPENTING OF IDOLS

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Unknown God Is Now Known to be the One, True God, Made Known in Jesus Christ Crucified and Risen*

What Paul has proclaimed to the Athenians is the Good News of God's rescue from this impending judgment upon the worship of idols, false gods. "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" (vv. 24-25). God created the first human beings from whom all are descended and he created them in such a fashion that they would search for God (vv. 26-27). Moreover, the one, true God who was "unknown" is now known as he has revealed himself through Jesus Christ (see John 14:7). At the cross of Golgotha Jesus has taken the judgment of the world upon himself, giving his life for the salvation of the world. God has given assurance to all by raising Jesus from the dead (v. 31b). And this Jesus will come again in glory to judge. And when he does come and judge it will be done in accordance with the righteousness required by God and freely granted through faith.

No Athenian or American need be ignorant of the one, true God.

The unknown God has made himself known in Jesus Christ. Good News indeed!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Faith in the One, True God*

Faith in the one, true God, faith that through Christ rescues from a guilty sentence come the judgment day, this faith is available to all by the grace of God. Only the power of God's Holy Spirit working this faith in Jesus Christ within the individual is able to trump the power of sin and turn the human heart away from the false idols. The Good News is this faith is offered freely to all, to Athenians and Americans alike.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Worshiping the One, True God*

This real living faith in Jesus Christ inspires believers to true and worthy worship of the one, true God. It enables believers to recognize the idols, the false gods and to repent of them. The Holy Spirit working faith in Christ in the lives of believers enables them to turn away from sinful idols and to put the good things that had become idols in their lives into their proper place. Moreover, believers are empowered to go into God's world, as did Paul, and name for others the false idols for what they are. Believers get to invite others to repent and believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And believers are empowered by God to keep the faith, even when they are being mocked and rejected.