

September 13, 2015

Counterculture: Worldviews in Conflict

Acts 17:16 – 34

Today we are beginning a series of topical messages we're calling 'Counterculture: God's Alternative Gospel Community', during which we'll be examining some major issues of our culture today, like tolerance, sexual identity, marriage, abortion, adoption, politics, racial reconciliation, and the problem of evil, to name a few; and examining how the Bible calls the church to respond. In other words, how ought the church to be in the world? How should a gospel community respond and deal with a world that has become increasingly anti-church, anti-Christ, and for the most part has relegated Christians to the margins of society? To put it another way, what does a gospel-centered worldview look like in today's world?

It is clear that the culture we see around us today is fundamentally different than the one most of us grew up in. It isn't just the technology. We've always seen great technological strides made in our lifetime. The difference is in worldviews. A worldview is essentially about what you believe to be true about the world around you. It is a theory of the world that we use to live in the world. It is a mental model of reality. It's a framework of ideas and attitudes about the world, ourselves, and life, that we use to answer the questions we have about life and to navigate through the world. How we act, how we react, how we behave in life, how we live – has everything to do with our worldview. It has everything to do with what we believe to be the truth about life. What we believe to be fundamentally true about the universe, about God, about ourselves, about the world in general and our life in particular, is what we call a worldview.

And increasingly here in the U.S., we've seen a biblical worldview that is at odds with the world around it. By biblical worldview, I mean that worldview that is grounded in the Bible as the very word of God. It is a kind of view that allows the Bible to teach us definitively how to live and answers all the important questions of life: Who is God? Who are we? What is the meaning of life? What is the problem with the world? How can we put it right? How can we know? A biblical worldview is not merely having Christian morals and values. You can have Christian values for all the wrong reasons, whether it's tradition, convenience, or an attempt to get God's approval. It also isn't just some knee-jerk reaction against all the evils in culture, which is the way many Christians are perceived today. Unfortunately most Christians are defined today in our culture by what they are against, not what they are for. A biblical worldview sees the ills of society, and instead of simply railing against them, has a message of healing and hope.

A biblical worldview sees the Bible as the defining story of history that is the true story of anything and everything that has ever existed. It starts in Genesis and ends in Revelation. The Bible sets the stage for all aspects of life and culture. The assumptions we think and live by must be Biblical ones, and we must use these biblical assumptions when we think about theology, politics, economics, medicine, the arts, psychology, literature, justice, or anything else. A biblical worldview is also culturally engaging. Because the Bible stands outside of cultural trends or fads that are ever changing, the Bible can speak to all people, in all cultures, at all times; and we can speak truthfully and significantly to cultural trends and issues, blessing what is good and cursing what is evil.

But a biblical world-view will get you into trouble. Most people today have trouble with a world-view that is not situationally relative, one that is not self-promoting, one that says that God created everything and there is only one way to get to Him. Often we'll find that what our society promotes as a world-view is 180 degrees opposite from a biblical worldview. You can take any area of study or life and compare the biblical world-view with a secular worldview and get exactly the opposite. In the Truth Project, Del Tackett gives this example.¹ Take the question of **anthropology, what is man?** What does God say about man? He is purposely created in the image of God. *Imago Deo*. What is the opposite of that? Random chance, not created, evolved from the goo – *Goo-man*. A biblical world-view says that man is sinful at heart – totally depraved. Not one God-ward thought or affection. What is the opposite? Man is basically good – improvable, evolving into a higher state.

1 Del Tackett – The Truth Project

Furthermore, if you look at the concept of *unity*, say in the case of marriage, what does the world try to do? Responds with *division*, divorce. Or take *diversity* – that which God says should not come together, as in so called 'gay marriage' – what does the world try to do? Tries to bring them together, *unification*. If God designs and declares that there are distinct social *roles* for men and women that differ – what does the world do? Tries to *blur* those distinctions, and now it even adds gender where there is no gender. When God says that we are *responsible* for our actions, the world responds by *shifting the blame*. Someone else is responsible for what I do. Where God says there is only *one way* the world responds with *many ways*. Where God establishes *authority* we respond with *rebellion*.

So what the church is faced with, particularly here in America, are worldviews that are in conflict. In fact whatever worldview you come across, religious, political, or social, it will be in conflict with a biblical worldview. If you talk to a Muslim, their worldview says that Allah is the only God and the way to get his approval is by doing stuff. Man is weak, but basically good and if you do enough good stuff you'll be approved. If you talk to a Hindu, their worldview says there is one divine power with innumerable forms and history is cyclic, passing through a continuous cycle of birth, growth, decline and destruction. If you don't get it right in this life, you'll have another one to try and get it right. If you talk to a Buddhist, God is merely a transcendent truth at which everyone struggles to arrive by getting rid of all desire, which is the root of suffering. History again is a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth to which we are attached by this suffering. So the question becomes, 'How do we live out our faith and proclaim the gospel in this kind of environment? How is the gospel message made relevant and powerful in a world of such competing worldviews?'

That is the question that faced Paul in Athens here in this text. What he was facing was another world-view. And it was a world-view that was remarkably similar to the prevailing world-view we face here today. Like ours, it was pluralistic, open, relatively tolerant of new ideas, fairly opposed to the idea that there was only one way to God and very polytheistic. And that didn't throw Paul off. He plunges right in. And what he does serves to act as a model for how we ought to handle the gospel in our culture today. Paul **engages the culture**, he **answers the big questions** that every world-view poses, and then he **gives them hope**.

First of all, Paul **engages the culture**. *Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.* Acts 17:16-17. Notice where he went – into the synagogues and into the marketplace. He went to church and he went downtown. Here he is in the center of intellectual and cultural life of the empire and he takes the gospel into the streets. Paul sees the gospel not just as something to bring private, personal peace and joy, but he saw the gospel as something for the public square and public discourse. He knew that what he had could compete very well in that sophisticated intellectual and cultural atmosphere.

When we hear the word marketplace, we tend to think of shopping. But the marketplace, the **agora**, was the cultural center of those cities. That's where you got the news of the day. The **marketplace** was the media center in an age without TV, radio, internet and newspapers. It was the center of the financial world – that's where the power brokers met and did their business. It was the art center, the political center and that's where the latest philosophical trends were discussed and debated. All of that was in the marketplace and in Athens, the ideas that were forged and accepted there flowed from there to the rest of the Empire. In a very real sense, this is where the prevailing worldview was forged. And Paul is not intimidated and he plunges right into that mix with the gospel and Luke says he was reasoning with them.

The word reasoning here is **dialegomai** and you can guess that's where we get our word dialogue from. But it was a very specific type of conversation or discussion that indicated a kind of reasoning that was not debate like we know it, nor was it preaching. It wasn't on a corner soap box like a street preacher. It was a dialogue where you ask questions, you find out the other person's premises, you listen very carefully and then you try to show them the truth on the basis of their own premises. You get engaged. You're not bombarding someone with biblical truth, trying to smash through their defenses like a battle tank. You listen, you talk, you discuss, you reason, you engage. And Paul dives into the marketplace for some days and engages the culture – because Paul believes that the gospel has what it takes to challenge and transform the most dominant ideas of a culture.

The implication of course for us is that on the one hand we don't just preach to the culture – nor on the other hand do we hide from it. You're aware of the leading philosophical ideas and ethos of a culture and you engage those ideas because the gospel has what it takes to confront and challenge those ideas and expose the lies they are built upon. Look at what happened 2,000 years ago. A little itinerant Jewish preacher from a backwater province comes to the intellectual and cultural center of the world and has the audacity to challenge the reigning ideas and philosophies of the day – and they laugh Him to scorn. In fact in verse 18, the guys that Paul is engaging say, "*What does this babblers wish to say?*" Literally, '*What does this gutter sparrow have to offer?*' it was a word used to describe someone who picked up bits and pieces of ideas and information in the marketplace and spun them into some sort of philosophy or theory. It was an insult. And yet in a little over two hundred fifty years Christianity swept that Greek and Roman world and completely changed the dominant cultural ideas and philosophies.

Luke tells us that Paul was reasoning with some of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers there in the marketplace. The Stoics were the moralists of their day and the Epicureans were the relativists. The Stoics believed in moral absolutes and that the meaning of life was to be good and virtuous and noble and honorable. And out of that came the idea that perseverance, endurance, soldiering on, was one of the top virtues. When suffering or tragedy happened you had to be detached – you hardened yourself – you didn't weep, you didn't moan or complain – you were stoic. You never let life get you down, or at least you never let on that life could get to you – you never let them see you sweat. That was the meaning of life. But history tells us that didn't really work out for most people. Stoicism wasn't a lot of help or comfort or encouragement in tragedy or suffering or pain. And the gospel moved in with hope, and eternal life and real joy, and people saw how Christians suffered so well and loved so well in spite of the suffering and pain. And people began to leave the gods of stoicism in droves.

Historically, Stoics didn't do very well. And neither did Epicureans. Epicureans believed that there were no moral absolutes – everything is relative; they didn't believe in any gods to speak of. They believed that when you died everything was all over – all you had was the here and now and so the meaning of life for them was to be happy. You should be free to do whatever made you happy and you should live your life for pleasure because this is all there was. Epicureans also talked a lot about sexual freedom and pleasing yourself by not recognizing any boundaries on sex. Epicureans were all about 'me'. Stoics were more noble in their ideology, but neither one could stand the test of life.

At the end of the day, it isn't enough just to endure for endurance's sake; it ultimately does not satisfy to do whatever pleases you. Because questions remain. And there are the big questions of life that any world-view but a biblical one cannot answer adequately. Questions like what is the meaning of life, or how do you deal with pain and suffering or what is right and wrong? And you see Paul engaging the culture where these questions were being asked, and no one had adequate answers. We need to realize that the gospel is relevant and powerful and able to speak to the prevailing culture of the day, whatever that is. We need to engage the culture.

And we need to engage it right at the point of its greatest weakness. What are the answers to life? Those are the questions every culture's world-view is asking and trying to answer and Paul does that. Look at how he does it. *Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.* Acts 17:22-23 Now the kind of worship these people engaged in was appeasement worship – give the god stuff so he or she will bless you or at least not target you for destruction. And in case there happened to be a god they didn't know about and might unintentionally insult, they built a generic altar to him.

But Paul sees the real issue here. **The real issue with them, and with us, is that we know there's a God there that we don't know.** We have a sense that there is a higher authority in the universe but we deny it, we marginalize it, we hide behind our fanciful theories and pseudo-intellectualism and alternate theories of life. There's a deep inner knowing that even though your public actions and philosophy of life says that there's no ultimate Being to whom you are accountable, your behavior is inconsistent with your philosophy. Essentially, Paul says, 'Let me show you the God you do not know!'

And he begins to answer the big questions of life: *The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.* The first big question is 'Who is God'? Every religion, every world-view tries to answer that question. And Paul says that there is one God, and He is knowable and transcendent. He's above the universe because He made the universe. Furthermore, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, He can't be controlled by religious scheming. D.A. Carson put it this way, *'At the end of the day you cannot domesticate God by properly performing sacrifices and religious rites so as to squeeze blessings out of Him.'*² Human hands cannot render adequate service to this God because this God is self-existent. In other words He does not need us – we need Him, right down to our very breath.

Then Paul answers the question of **who we are**: *And He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place,* Acts 17:24-26 We are the creation of God and that implies that we are not then free just to do as we please. It implies control, it implies submission to the will of God. It also makes it clear that there is just one race – the human race. We all came from Adam. This struck at the heart of Athenian snobbery and racial prejudice. Athenians tended to believe that they were at the top of the cultural and racial heap, so to speak. Their word for anyone not Athenian was 'barbarian' because they said their speech sounded like 'bar, bar, bar, bar, bar'.

And then Paul speaks to the question of **why am I here**: This God made men: *that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,* Acts 17:27 This is a bigger God, a higher God, a more transcendent God than you've ever heard of – but He's also more near, more, immanent, more intimate than any god you've ever known. He wants to meet with you – He wants to fellowship with you. The purpose of your life is to find fellowship and union with this God. And then Paul quotes their own literature: *for "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring."* Acts 17:28

These two lines are from some of their own celebrated thinkers and Paul is saying, 'Some of your own philosophers have proposed a god like this – a God who is so great that it is His power that holds us all up every moment and a God that we image and reflect – your own people have proposed that this God exists'. This view of a great God, a God who is worthy of worship, a God far bigger than the gods they have which were really only extensions of themselves, exposes at the same time, **our deep denial of the truth and the inherent inconsistencies in our thinking.** In other words, to some degree we all know that there is a God like this, even though we deny it.

This is an appeal to the intellect, but it is also an appeal to the heart. Our hearts were built to want a great God – a God that we can't manipulate, a God that we can't cajole or overrule. We fight against it, but in the end that's what we want. And Paul shows them that God. He says, 'This God has *determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place;* or as another translation puts it, *He has determined their appointed times and marked out the boundaries of their habitation.* Do you know what that means – that means God foreordained everything. When you were born, where you live, where you've gone – has all been foreordained by this God. **God is so big that everything that happens is part of His plan.**

And we hate that idea when we first hear it – it rocks us to the core and we do everything we can to deny it. We want a God we can bend to our will, a God that does what we want – and we come up with the most fantastic theories and explanations to accommodate our views of the God we want and He ends up looking a lot like us. And that's a small god – a god that is simply a projection of us. A lot of Christians have what some have called a moralistic therapeutic deism. They believe in God, but He's only there to give us what we want, and the main goal in life is to be happy and feel good about yourself. We believe in God as long as He operates like we think He ought to operate and gives us what we want. But that God is too small to trust. That God is too small to worship. Only a great God is worthy of our worship – only a big God is worthy of our trust.

2 D.A. Carson The Worldview Clash (from Southern Cross Quarterly)

And the test comes when trouble hits. What happens to your faith when tragedy strikes? What is there to trust when life turns on you? Does your faith disintegrate? If it does it shows that you've been believing in something less than God Himself, and He's upset your neat little program of how things are supposed to work. Elizabeth Elliot once said, **'God is God, and if He is God, He is worthy of my worship and my service, and I will find rest nowhere but in His will. And that rest is infinitely, immeasurably, unspeakably beyond my largest notions of what He is up to.'**³In other words, this is a great God. A sovereign God. The only God worthy of your worship and your service and your obedience.

And then Paul answers the question of **what is wrong in the world:** *Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent, because He has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a Man whom He has appointed...*' Acts 17:29-31 In other words, Paul is telling them that they have offended a holy, transcendent God by worshipping objects of their own imagination, gods created in their own image, and that final judgment is coming on account of it. They have refused to acknowledge this great God that created them and sustains them. At its heart, sin is treasuring and loving and valuing anything more than God.

He paints this picture of impending judgment, and then he gives them hope: *and of this He has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead.*" Acts 17:31 Paul says the proof of all this, **the hope this world-view offers**, is in the resurrection. And it was this that ended the discussion. Because the death and resurrection of Jesus brings to bear certain realities, certain truths, certain obligations even, that we don't want to hear. Everything was fine up to this point. Because up until we start talking about the death and resurrection of Jesus, people can look at Christianity and say, 'Well the Golden Rule sure is a good one, I like that, and I can accept Jesus was a good moral teacher, and Christianity certainly has some really great points – but there are some things I don't like – I'll accept that, but I won't accept that' – and people can pick and choose what they like.

But the death and resurrection of Jesus changes everything. If Jesus was raised from the dead – then Christianity is true and there is a great God that is over everything and He does command people everywhere to repent and He will judge the world in righteousness. If the resurrection is true it means you can't pick and choose your reality – you can't live with a moral therapeutic gospel – if Christ died and was raised to life – God is real and you must embrace the gospel as true whether you like it or not. You see, if the resurrection is true – we cannot be content with half-measures or lukewarm allegiance to Christ. If it isn't true – we can live any way we want. But if it is true, and it is, we have no option but to live for Him with all our might and discard any other ideas and philosophies and religions. Because the resurrection of Jesus Christ means that God has the highest claim on your life.

We live in an age of world-views in conflict and there is only one world-view that offers any kind of hope in a hopeless world. You see, Paul was so convinced of this that he went and engaged the culture in the middle of one of the most sophisticated, intellectual places of that day because there is God that people know they don't know, because the gospel is real and Jesus was raised from the dead for your salvation and mine and these people needed to hear it. He knew he would be mocked and scorned, but that was nothing compared to the mocking and scorning and beating and suffering Jesus took to bear our sins on the cross to deliver us from sin and death and hell and bring us to God. 'Men of Athens, let me tell you about this God you don't know. Let me tell you about a great God who is really worthy of your worship. Let me tell you how He left His throne and came to earth to rescue fallen, broken people, by dying on a cross and being raised to life again to bring you back to the God who made you.'

3 Elizabeth Elliot Through Gates of Splendor: 40th Anniversary Edition (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1981), p. 267n

Penn Jillette, of Penn and Teller, is an outspoken atheist who nevertheless respects someone who has the courage of his convictions: *"I've always said that I don't respect people who don't proselytize. If you believe that there is a heaven and a hell, and people could be going to hell...and you think it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward...How much do you have to hate somebody to believe everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? I mean, if I believed, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that a truck was coming at you, and you didn't believe that truck was bearing down on you, there is a certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that."*⁴

This was what motivated Paul. Verse 16 says: *Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.* Acts 17:16 In other words, Paul sees a culture with a world-view that is taking them away from God, a world-view that leads to destruction, and he is provoked, stirred up, to engage them. He sees the truck bearing down on them and he's jumping in to tackle them. It's a mix of emotions this word describes. On the one hand he sees the city full of idols and he's angry at the evidence of a deceptive world-view that will destroy them, and on the other hand he is moved by a profound love for these deluded people that compels him to jump in front of the truck regardless of the personal cost.

Hudson Taylor was once speaking with a young Chinese cotton dealer he had led to Christ and the man asked him a question that haunted Taylor: "How long have you had the glad tidings in England?" he asked. Taylor very uncomfortable, said it was several hundred years. "What!" exclaimed the man in astonishment, "Several hundred years? Is it possible that you have known about Jesus so long and only now have come to tell us? My father sought the truth for more than twenty years and died without finding it. Why did you not come sooner?" If you believe that what you believe is really real, you will not be able to keep silent.

Our gracious God and Father,

The heavens declare Your glory, the earth Your riches. The universe is Your temple and Your presence fills immensity. Fill our souls with the wonder and awesomeness of Your greatness. Break in pieces every prideful, lofty thought that refuses to acknowledge Your rule and reign over all things. Destroy the idols that presume to take Your place. Annihilate each clinging shred of self-righteousness that would prompt us to create a god in our own image. Melt our hearts with Your majesty and mercy. Nothing exceeds Your power. Nothing is too great for You to do, nothing is too good for You to give. Your might is infinite, Your love is boundless, Your grace is limitless and Your name is glorious. Let us take that saving name into the marketplaces of this world to engage our culture, exalt Your name and lift up the cross to a dying world for the sake of Your name and Your glory we pray in the saving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.