

Christ Presbyterian Church

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"Reason for Hope: Other Religions"

Acts 17:16-34

Please take out your Bibles and turn to the Book of Acts chapter 17 toward the end of the Bible. I'm really excited about these next five weeks as we will have a series of sermons about apologetics. This is the last series in our year of tracing the story of Jesus through the writings of Luke, the Gospel of Luke, and the Book of Acts.

These last five weeks we are going to call, "A Reason for Hope" for something called apologetics. *Apologetics* is a word that many of you have not heard much about but that I hope you will get to know. Apologetics sounds a lot like *apologize* or saying *I'm sorry* but it really means *a word in defense*, implying that there has been a prior word *against*. In other words, if I am going to defend something, somebody has to have already attacked it and now I am trying to set the record straight. Christian apologetics is that. A world of other faiths, other beliefs, other systems looking at the Christian faith saying, "That's wrong" or "That's weird" or "Why do you believe that?" People using apologetics become apologists to try to explain to the skeptical world what it's about.

This is a long tradition of the church. Right at the beginning of the second century, a guy named Tertullian stood up when all the surrounding people were saying, "All you do is, you take a little Christianity, a little Judaism, a little Greek mystery religion, you wrap 'em altogether, and everybody's happy." He said, "No! *This* is what Christianity is about." Fast forward. Many of you in school had to read the work of St. Augustine. Augustine's book, *The City of God*, was an apologetic, that is, people were seeing the Roman Empire fall and they were blaming the Christians. Augustine's job was to say, "No! Christians are the *best citizens* because they are citizens here on earth *and* in heaven." Apologetics.

Fast forward *again* because it's not always theoretical. A group in 20th century Germany rises up and starts to say that it is the Jews among us who are the source of all evil. They intimidate much of the Lutheran Church in Germany into going along with them saying that Jews are the Jesus-killers, that they have no rights, and that we ought to be able to get them. A small group of German-Lutherans rise up against that and does apologetics, saying "Jesus was a Jew. Did you forget? Jesus died for us all. We cannot kill our way to salvation." Some of them set the record straight at the cost of their lives or had to flee the country. Josh McDowell is an example of somebody *now* who does apologetics with his book *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*.

How does that affect you? Apologetics sounds like it's just for eggheads but that's not true. If you say that you believe in God, if you say that you follow Jesus, then you already *are* an

apologist. As soon as anybody asks you anything about your beliefs—“Why do you believe this?” “Why don’t you believe that?” “Why do you do this?” “Why don’t you do that?”—that’s apologetics and it’s not just for experts. The question is not, will you do apologetics? The question really is: Will you be any good at it? Or will you say, “Uh, I don’t know. You better ask the preacher,” or “Uh, I don’t know. I’ll get back to you.” “Uh, I don’t believe that either.” Those are not good responses. One of my mentor’s maxims was, “If you don’t stand for something, you’ll fall for anything.” We want to help you so you don’t fall for anything.

The next five weeks we are going to look at five answers that our society has against Christianity and try to give a more-reasoned apology. There are three reasons we are supposed to do this. The first is that **you are commanded to be an apologist**. God tells the apostle Peter to say, “Always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that is in you; but do it gently and with respect.” We are supposed to have an answer. Be ready with it. Know how to say it. When Jesus says, “Love the Lord your God with your heart, soul, strength, and mind,” He means that ideas matter. We are commanded to awaken our minds.

In the same way, those of us who are trying to do apologetics need a **foundation for confident living in a life that is at odds with our culture**. If you live in service and give way too much, if you are living chaste lives in a lust-filled society, if you are one of those who is trying to be creative and go a different direction from everybody else because for you, life is an adventure, people are going to ask you questions. One of the shames of the 20th and 21st centuries is that Christians have sort of been put on the sidelines in the great debates about science, politics, and economics. They are *just* Christians. You ought to be at the *forefront* of those discussions. Not me, I sit here in some church. You! The only way that we can help is to discover not only some of those answers but also how to *talk* about our faith.

The last reason we are supposed to do this is because **we are in a spiritual battle**. There are forces that are drawing you to God and there are forces that are pulling you away from God. In that battle, the apostle Paul says, “So we demolish arguments and every pretention that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and take captive every thought to make our thoughts obedient to Christ.” I believe in a culture of tolerance. I do not believe that that means anything goes. How do you hold those together? Ideas out there may destroy you or bring you to life. How do you know the difference?

So for five weeks we want to look at five of these big issues and just take a first dig at it. I’m going to offer you couple of suggestions. If you don’t have enough of an answer to something that I deal with, we have two books in Pathways that I think would be very helpful. We’ll talk about these again. The first is *I’m Glad You Asked*, good answers to tough questions. The other one, that I think ought to be on everybody’s bookshelf anyway, is *Letters From a Skeptic* by Greg Boyd. Greg’s dad is an atheist who writes to his son, a professor at a Christian school, and says, “Here’s why I do not believe.” Real questions. Real answers. I think you would find them very helpful. I don’t want you to say, “Oh, golly, this is great! Five weeks with the eggheads. I don’t have to come.”

One of the eggheads who comes here every couple of years is Dr. Richard Mouw, the president of Fuller Seminary. Dr. Mouw says he was asked, “Why should I send my students to seminary? They don’t need all that stuff. There are people going to hell out there.” Mouw replied, “Well, you know, you ought to think of life like an emergency room in a hospital. People come flying up to the doors and as soon as the doors open there is all this action. People running and yelling. Orders are being given. People are being manhandled. It looks like chaos.” And the guy goes,

“Yeah, that’s for me. I want to be in there.” Dr. Mouw says, “That’s great, but who discovered the drug that the doctor is giving to the patient? Who taught the nurse that if the pulse is going down, give him *this* drug and not *that* drug? Who directed the doctor to say who will live and who must die? It’s those people back in the classrooms. The only way you can be effective in the emergency room is if you spend a *little* time in the class room.” I hope not to make this boring. I hope to make it important.

The five arguments we are going to raise are: 1. **All religions are the same**; 2. **No good God could tolerate this kind of evil and pain**; 3. **Jesus is a good guy, a great figure, but not God**. 4. **Why is the God of the Old Testament so violent and vicious? I could never believe in that God**; 5. **In the end being a good person is what counts, not what you believe**—which I think is very common in Minnesota. I hope you will come with us.

Can we just pray here for a second so that my brain and my soul can catch up? I would just like *us* to be focused.

Lord Jesus, I thank You for my friends who are here in part because this is just where we go on Sundays but in part because we hunger to make sense of our lives. We want so much to know truth. We hear all kinds of talk about You. We want not only to know what to believe but how what we believe changes how we live. Be with Your Word. Amen.

I don’t think apologetics are any good to anybody at all if they stay in the seminary or the university or even in these books. I think apologetics only matters if it comes across your *real* life. Let me give you one that comes across my *real* life every week. I work out fairly religiously. I go to the gym twice a year, whether I need to or not. And I *need* to! So anyway... the last time I was at that gym, there was a man just getting into the shower unwrapping his turban. He is a Sikh and he was wearing a turban. While I am plugging away on the treadmill, I notice a young woman in a chador on a bicycle is sweating profusely. After I work out, I stop at Byerly’s and, as I walk in, coming toward me is a man with a long beard in one of those black, high-brimmed, funny hats. He is a Hasidic Jew.

Less than a mile from my house and in less than an hour, I have bumped into three of the major religions of the world. If we had a conversation, they could say, “You know what I hate? I hate the arrogance of you Christians. Six billion of *us* on this planet, four billion of *us* are not followers of Jesus Christ, and yet you are saying that all of us are going to hell.” And I’d reply, “Well, I don’t think....” And the guy would say, “Oh, yeah? Somebody read to me from your Bible. Your Jesus says, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by Me.’ Right?” “Well, yeah, but uh....” “Didn’t that other guy, Luke, didn’t he say in Acts, ‘It is appointed once for a person to die and then the judgment.’ ‘There is no other name under heaven by which men and women must be saved but Jesus Christ.’ Isn’t that what you believe?” “Well, yeah, but....” “Okay, then, how are you not arrogant?” “Okay!”

I think apologetics begins right there. That is an overblown example. People don’t usually talk like that in Minnesota, mostly because we are afraid to talk about this kind of stuff. Part of apologetics is deciding what you *do* believe. It’s internal. It’s discovering what you *do* believe about God. The other part of apologetics is learning how to say that to people who don’t share your beliefs, how to defend your faith to a skeptical audience. I think it starts not with your words but your attitude. Apologetics starts with your attitude. I think that *attitude* in Christian churches is so wrong so often that we *deserve* the bad reputation we have received.

The apostle Paul gives us a better way to handle this. He says, 1st Corinthians, the most famous chapter in the Bible, “Love is patient, love is kind.” At the end of that passage Paul says, “Now we see dimly, like through a dark glass, through a mirror that’s dim. We see shadows in there, but at the end we will see clearly, face to face. Now we know in part; *then* we’ll know the whole thing.” I think what the apostle Paul is saying to you and me as we talk about this faith that we hold on to, that we sometimes cling to, is that we *do* have something that we see through the mirror. “I see something moving over there and I believe that it’s God, and it gives me hope that is changing my life.” I shouldn’t apologize for that but, at the same time, I have to admit that if it’s a dark mirror for the apostle Paul, it’s even darker for me, and I should have a sense of humility that goes along with my hope. Don’t beat people over the head with your answers.

From Acts 17, “While Paul was waiting for his friends in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see the city filled with idols. So he reasoned” (or he argued) “in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him, some asking, ‘What is this babbling trying to say?’ and others, ‘He seems to be advocating foreign gods’” because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

“So they brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus.” When Deb did the children’s sermon today, she showed a temple on top of a hill. That was the most famous place in Athens, but it wasn’t the Areopagus. It was the Acropolis. The Acropolis is the big temple on top. On another hill in Athens is the Areopagus, an open-air, university debating society. That’s where they would bring Paul and say, “‘Tell us about this new teaching. These are some strange ideas, and we would like to know what they mean.’ All the people of Athens and all the foreigners living there spent all their time talking about and listening to the latest ideas.” They spent *no time* thinking about how to rescue their economy from a crash that is ruining the world—that is not in the text. The Athenians were big on the latest ideas. Athens was like a never-ending geek fight. It’s like one of those all-nighters that you had in college but at Harvard and with lots of beer. They were that way all the time.

So Paul stands up and says, “People of Athens, I can tell you are really religious. As I walked around and looked, I even found an altar dedicated: *to an unknown God*. ‘You know that you don’t know what you worship—and that’s what I am going to talk to you about. The God who made the world and everything is the Lord of heaven and earth. He doesn’t live in temples built by human hands. He is not served by human hands as if He needed anything. Rather, God gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one person God made all the nations to inhabit the earth. God marked out the nations’ times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that people would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, even though God isn’t very far from any of us.’” Then Paul quotes a song of the day—a Greek song, “‘For in God we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are His offspring.’”

Paul goes on, “So since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the Divine Being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked that kind of ignorance but *now* He commands all people everywhere to ‘turn around, repent.’ For God has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the Man He has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising that Man from the dead.” That was the end of his speech.

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of the Greeks sneered but others said, “We want to hear more.” So Paul left the council and some followed and believed, like Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, and a woman named Demaris, and some others. And

they kept on talking. That's how Paul answers the question, "How come there are so many religions? Are they all wrong? Are we all going to hell?"

Because this is the first week, let me just share with you how I think Paul counters other people. This is Apologetics 101. Apologetics 101 starts with the idea that he does his argument in less than two minutes. I read that part in less than two minutes because he knows when you talk about faith, people have about an elevator ride's worth of attention. You can't give a lecture. You have to give an *image* that ends with a question that leads on to more discussion. If you give a lecture, eyes glaze over, and people walk away on the inside. Paul, by the way, is not usually short-winded. Paul could talk with the best of them. Paul lectured so long one time that the crowd started to fall asleep—not like any of you! A young man sitting in a window falls asleep and falls out of the window from the third story to the ground, dead. This is a guy who could talk but he also knows when to be quiet. Brevity!

Three things in Apologetics 101. You will see that **Paul is unapologetic and he is respectful**. He starts with respect. "I see you are religious folks. You want to know God. You even admit there is a God you don't know about." Instead of, "Let me win my argument and destroy you with my truth, you ignorant fool." He is respectful and he is unapologetic about what makes *his* view different from *their* view. Too many Christians are so nice that they will never get into an argument because they want to get along. You know what? In the end that produces chaos. People don't know what Christians believe because Christians won't tell them what they believe because they are afraid of offending them. *That's* not offensive. Doing it without respect *is*.

The second thing in Apologetics 101 is that **Paul knows their culture and speaks their language**. That's why it's so hard for those of us who live in a sound-bite culture to talk about things. It's hard to put the Jesus story on a bumper sticker. You can say, "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it," but that doesn't even come close to settling it. Instead, Paul quotes a line from one of *their* songs. Paul talks about *their* philosophers, not the Bible and uses that as a bridge to say, "We both share the same issue. 'Who is God? How do you get to know Him?'" When he talks with the Epicureans it is obvious that he knows their culture. Remember Epicurean philosophy? This is the idea that we all live a short time so we ought to live simply and cleanly and do no harm to others. By the time that Paul lives, Epicureanism has really become, "Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die." We still use that phrase. That's Epicureanism gone bad.

The third thing is that he does not try to kill all the counterfeits. He doesn't try to show how wrong, wrong, wrong they are. Instead, **he points to the real thing**. He doesn't say, "This is how you spot counterfeit money" and look at all the flaws. He points to the genuine bill. That's why Paul is *Jesus this*, *Jesus that*, *Jesus the other* because he doesn't want them to feel bad. He wants them to feel good about Jesus. That's apologetics.

So somebody comes up to you and says, "I think all religions are the same." What if you freaked them out and said, "I agree"? Because I do. I basically think all religions are the same. Religion is a human attempt to figure out who God is and how to please that God before you die. It's no wonder that it's wildly different all over the world in different times and different eras because we all see things so differently. What if I would agree that all religions *are* the same? No religion is better than any other. I think that is true. I mean, I think some religions are really dumb. Some religions maybe shouldn't even be heard from but I think all religions are human-based including this one and a lot of traditions that we have here are just traditions.

I think what makes the Jesus story different is not our religion. It is the idea of Jesus. It is the idea that we say, "At the core of this all, it is not about coming to church; it is about the idea that we have come to believe that all human religions are trying to get to God and that in Jesus we see *God* coming to us, God walking saying, "You want to see God? Look at Me. You want to hear what God thinks of you? Listen to Me. You want to live with God? Follow Me." That's all that makes us different from all the other religions. It's just Jesus. I think there are going to be a lot of Lutherans and Baptists and Catholics and, maybe, even one or two Presbyterians who wake up in hell because they believed in their religion and not in Jesus. So while I think that all religions *are* the same, I think God has spoken to us in a unique way. So, I think that's Apologetics 101.

I think what Paul does best is that he realizes that when people raise objections to Christianity often the spoken question is not the real question. You have to figure out the real question here. It's foolish to stand up and say, "I believe that all religions have to be right. All religions are the same. All religions are right." That's stupid, isn't it? A Hindu and a Muslim both cannot be equally right. They can both be wrong but you have to sort of choose – many gods/one God. They can't both be right.

What the person is really saying is not, "I think all religions are right." What they are really saying is, "Are all those people going to hell who don't get it right?" What they are really saying is, "How can you Christians be so sure you are right? Does that mean that I have to be like *you*?" What's the real question? That's when it gets *personal*. What is *personally* being asked? Paul is saying, "I see you have a lot of idols, a lot of different ways to live the good life."

What idols in our culture would be attacked? Some would say that the shrines of our culture are *filled* on Sunday mornings, well, *late* Sunday mornings. They are football stadiums. Others would say, "No, no, no! The shrines of *our* culture are those skyscrapers and McMansions because *they* are the good life." Others would say, "No, no, no! If you come in from outside, the shrines of this culture are found in these huge buildings that fill up with people for a couple of hours." Again, they are not churches; they are movie theaters where we show pictures of these impossibly beautiful people who stay young forever. "No, no, no! Our shrines are in the 3,000 Twin Cities-area congregations, those different little steeples, where everybody thinks they have the right idea of the truth. What does your life worship? Not what does your mind worship but what does your *life* worship?"

Paul speaks first to the stated question and then gets to the real one. When somebody says, "I think all religions are the same." I think Paul starts out by saying, "You know, I think people aren't going to hell because they believe in different religions. I think God wants *everybody* to be saved." He says, "God gives everyone life and breath and everything else. God did this so that people would seek Him and, perhaps, touch him, and find Him." This is not a test where God wants people to fail. God wants *everybody* in the boat! You and I are not in the handing-out-cards-to-hell-and-heaven business. We are in the lifting-up-Jesus-and-hope-everybody-follows business. Paul's reply to the real question is, "God wants *all* of us to be saved."

The second thing Paul says is, "Ignorance is no excuse." Well, in this case, ignorance *is* an excuse. Paul says, "You all have different kinds of gods. In the past God overlooked that kind of ignorance because you were trying your best." Romans 1, "From the beginning of the world, God's invisible qualities, His power and goodness, have been seen by everybody so everybody knows that there is a God." I've got to know more, but there *is* a God. The Book of Hebrews says, "In many different ways God spoke through various prophets." I believe ignorance *is* an

excuse. Jesus does not want to take a 3-year-old in China, a 2-year-old Sikh, a 12-year-old Muslim girl and send them to hell because they got the answer wrong in Theology 101. I don't think the God of love works that way.

No. 3, I think Paul is saying that God wants everybody to be saved, ignorance isn't an excuse, but he is also saying, people who know better *will* be judged. In the past God overlooked ignorance but now God commands all people everywhere to turn around, to repent, to turn to Him. I think the core of this is right there. You cannot repent until you are convinced that you are wrong. People who are ignorant are not in trouble with God. People who are *not* ignorant, people who *do* know better, *you* are the ones who are in trouble. You cannot repent unless you believe that you are wrong.

God has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the Man He has appointed, giving proof by raising that Man from the dead. That's the fourth thing that Jesus says. Are all religions the same? Are we all going to go to hell? He says, "God wants everybody to be saved." Jesus changes everything. More on that next week.

Paul gave his little talk and then he said, "If you want to know more, follow me out of here," and some people followed him. Some people mocked but Paul said, "Jesus changes everything." When Paul came to Athens, he was distressed because there were all these idols filling the city. He was not upset because people were getting Religion 202 answers wrong. He was not worried about people flunking the test. He was afraid that with all these different religions around, people were going to go the wrong way, to death, and that was too important for him to leave alone.

Are all religions the same at the end of the day if they are just human ways to figure out who God is? Yeah! But if the purpose of seeking God is to find God, then they are *not* all the same. Let me use the analogy of a mineshaft: These terrible mine accidents: the explosion comes, the mine is sealed off, the miners are trapped a mile below the surface, the air is running out. There are three corridors in front of them: one corridor they know leads to the fire that started the avalanche; the next leads to a pocket of methane gas that will kill them; and the third from which a breeze is blowing leads to the surface. A voice is saying, "Come on. Follow Me." Are all three of these paths the same?

Lord Jesus, I thank You for reminding me that I do not have all the answers and certainly I am no better than my sisters and my brothers, my fellow children of God from other religions, but I believe that You have come because I am in deadly peril. We are trapped in a mineshaft and You come in to the mine and say, "Follow Me." Come to us. Let us hear Your voice. Let us follow You. Let many follow You so that we might not perish and that we might live. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.