

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 25, 2015**

**ESSENTIALS OF OUR FAITH (3):  
THE TRUE AND LIVING GOD**

**Acts 17:16-31**

There is an old story about a small airplane carrying the pilot and three passengers: a boy scout, a pastor, and a world-renowned scientist who claimed to be the smartest man in the world. The plane developed engine trouble and, after exhausting all other options, the pilot ejected after instructing his three passengers to do the same.

There was only one problem. The three passengers could find only two parachutes. The scientist insisted that the well-being of the world depended on his expertise. So he quickly grabbed some gear and jumped out of the plane.

The boy scout and the pastor looked at each other. The pastor said: “Go ahead and use the last parachute, son. God has given me a great life, and I’m ready to go to heaven.”

The scout replied: “Don’t worry, pastor. The smartest man in the world just jumped out of the plane wearing my backpack.”

Aha! It goes to show that some things in life really are essential, and some are not. It takes wisdom, discernment, and proper perspective – it takes right thinking – to know the difference. And to make sure we’re clear on what is essential. Which is why we are taking the time to think together about the *Essentials of Our Faith* we affirm as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Last Sunday, and the Sunday before, we focused on our conviction that the Bible is the Word of God, fully inspired (“God-breathed”) by the Holy Spirit, infallible, unerring, totally trustworthy, and the final authority on what we are to believe and how we are to live. It is “the book that understands us,” the written Word of God that points us to the living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone can save us from our sins and bring us into a right relationship – a relationship of trusting faith, never-ending perpetual thankfulness, and loving obedience – to God. Today we turn our attention to what it says in the EPC *Essentials* printed in your bulletin this morning. It says:

*We believe in one God, the sovereign Creator and Sustainer of all things, infinitely perfect and eternally existing in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To Him be all honor, glory, and praise forever!*

To which I say: “Amen and amen!”

Let’s think about this together, using Paul’s ministry and message in Athens as told in Acts 17 as the backdrop for our reflections.

## **WE BELIEVE IN GOD**

First of all, we affirm without hesitation that we believe in God. We believe in *one* God. We believe in the true and living God, the sovereign Creator and Sustainer of everything there is. We believe in the true and living God who has revealed Himself in the world He has made, in history (which is, in the end, *His* story), in the pages of the Bible (which is the Word of God), and in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the true Son of God and Savior of sinners. We believe in one God who exists eternally in three Persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. This last statement, of course, refers to the doctrine of the Trinity, which we will come back to next Sunday.

We believe in the same God in whom the apostle Paul believed, the God he proclaimed to the people and philosophers of Athens, the God they did not know.

Athens, as you probably know, was the philosophical mecca of the ancient world. It boasted a rich philosophical heritage going back to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. It was the undisputed intellectual capital of the Roman Empire. If you could make it big as a philosopher, or mathematician, or some other kind of intellectual in Athens, then you could make it anywhere. The culture of Athens presented unique challenges to Paul in his proclamation of the gospel.

There are four things about Paul's experience and witness in Athens I want you to notice.

## **WHAT PAUL SAW**

Notice first what Paul saw when he arrived in Athens. What he saw, it says in verse 16, was a city "full of idols." It was a city "submerged" in the worship of pagan gods and idols of all kinds. Eugene Peterson describes the city in *The Message* as "a junkyard of idols." Everywhere he went, everywhere he turned, on every hill, in every square, it seemed, Paul encountered idol after idol, statue after statue, shrine after shrine, temple after temple, each one dedicated to this god or that goddess. The whole pantheon was there. That the Athenians were religious is beyond question. They were, as Paul acknowledged in verse 22, "very religious" "in every way." Religious as they were, however, Athens was a city full of people going about their lives in spiritual darkness and confusion.

That is what Paul saw. It is not that he was blind to the outward beauty and magnificence of the city with all its architectural landmarks and cultural achievements, any more than he would fail to recognize the beauty and grandeur of a place like Washington, D.C., which symbolizes our history and heritage as a nation.

The beauty and imposing magnificence of Athens did not impress Paul, however. They would not impress him, if they failed to bring honor and praise to the one true and living God, if they did not and would not acknowledge God and His claim to be Lord of all.

Athens, of course, was not – *is not* – the only place where idols abound. We are surrounded by them, and by neighbors, friends, family members, co-workers, sports heroes, and cultural

influencers – people in all walks of life who, knowingly or not, engage in idol-worship. An idol does not have to be a statue. It does not require a shrine or temple for its worship. An idol, simply put, is anyone or anything that takes the place of the true and living God in your life. It is a “god-substitute” (J. R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World*, 291).

There is no shortage of “god-substitutes” in the world today. Things like power, for one. Political power. Or football, for another. Or beauty. Or money. Or food. Or sex. Or fame. Or marriage, whether it is the longing to *be* married, an obsessive desire to have the *perfect* marriage, or the passion to *redefine* marriage to suit our own desires. Any of these can become an idol in a person’s life. Which means it is good and wise to take an honest look at your life, to renounce the worship of any idols or false gods you have set up in your heart, and to resolve (and keep on resolving ) to worship, serve, trust, follow, and love the true and living God. With all your heart and soul and mind and strength.

Many people today believe in some kind of deity, but it is often a god of their own making. For instance, actress Sarah Michelle Gellar, best known for her role in the television show “Buffy the Vampire Slayer,” has said: “I consider myself a spiritual person. I believe in an idea of God, although it is my personal ideal. I find most religions interesting, and I’ve been to every kind ... Catholic, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist. I’ve taken bits from everything and customized it.” Which is not unlike what the Athenians did with all the gods and goddesses of their pantheon to choose from.

### **WHAT PAUL FELT**

The second thing to notice is what Paul felt as he surveyed the situation in Athens. Verse 16 says he was “greatly distressed” by what he saw. Far from being impressed by the religiosity of the city, he was distressed in his spirit by the spiritual poverty, anarchy and confusion that reigned in Athens. He had a heavy heart as he contemplated the spiritual lostness of the Athenians. Grief filled his heart because he knew that all the idolatry and pagan practices of Athens grieved the heart of God, who alone is worthy of the worship and devotion of men and women created in His image. Seeing the true spiritual condition of Athens moved Paul to deep distress in his spirit.

The question for you and me is this:

How about us? Are we distressed by the spiritual lostness of people all around us? Are you? Or is it something we have learned to just ignore? Is your heart grieved by the things that grieve the heart of God? And what shall we do about it as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ who, by His grace, have come to know the true and living God?

It is more than one question, I know. But they all go together.

## **WHAT PAUL DID**

Notice third what Paul did, how he responded under the leading of the Holy Spirit. Verse 17 says that “he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks (Gentiles), as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.”

Paul did not wait for people to come to him. He went to them. He was not passive. He did not wait for an invitation. He did not beat people over the head with the Bible or preach an “angry” gospel. But he took the initiative to tell the people and philosophers of Athens about Jesus and the resurrection. Along the way, as it says in verse 18, he conversed with both Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.

Epicureans believed that pleasure was the chief end or purpose of life. They believed the gods were distant and uninvolved in everyday life, so the guiding principle of life for them was “Live for the moment.” The pursuit of pleasure without pain was their highest goal. Not unlike a lot of people today.

Stoics, on the other hand, believed that everything is determined by fate. Their theme song was “Que sera, sera, whatever will be will be.” They believed that whatever happens must be accepted without emotion. They refused to be ruled by their feelings. They saw it as their duty to accept and endure with a spirit of quiet resignation whatever pain that might come into their lives.

What Paul did do? He met them where they were. He engaged them on their own turf. He tried to establish common ground with them. But in doing so, he did not, and would not, compromise the essence of the Christian faith.

How do we know this? Notice fourth what Paul said.

## **WHAT PAUL SAID**

What did Paul say? The content of his message, it says in verse 18, was “the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.”

Which is our message, too. It is the core of our faith. Some people love to get into theological arguments or philosophical debates about odd questions just for the fun of it. That is not what God calls us to do. Getting hung up on little side bars that obscure or deflect attention from the essentials of the Christian faith is not our mission from God. Our job, like Paul’s, is to make connections with people where they are, and to help them understand and embrace the good news about Jesus and the resurrection, along with the life-changing, eternity-altering implications of that good news for all who truly believe.

## **THE UNKNOWN GOD**

When the opportunity arose to present the message of the gospel on Mars Hill, in a gathering of a group of philosophers known as the Areopagus (17:22), Paul’s strategy was to start where

they were. He began by making a personal connection with them. Among all the temples and shrines and statues and altars that filled Athens, Paul had found one dedicated “To an Unknown God” (17:23). It was to this “Unknown God” – the God they did not know – that Paul was determined to introduce them.

There is no way in the world we could ever exhaust the truth about God and His glory, or the greatness of His character, in one sermon, or even a million. All the books ever written, put together, could not contain the totality of who God is. Why? Because, as the Westminster Confession of Faith affirms: “God is infinite in being and perfection” (WCF, Chapter 2.1). God is *infinite*. We who are finite can never completely understand or explain or contain the fullness of God in His infinite-ness. You and I will never be able to fully figure God out, because He is God, and we are not. In Romans 11, at the conclusion of three chapters on the mysterious but beautiful and grace-filled doctrine of election, Paul exclaims:

Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and understanding of God?  
How unsearchable are His judgments,  
and His paths beyond tracing out!  
(Romans 11:33)

Peterson paraphrases it this way: “Have you ever come on anything like this extravagant generosity of God, this deep, deep wisdom? It’s way over our heads. We’ll never figure it out.

It is true: We will never figure it all out perfectly. We will never figure God out totally. But this doesn’t mean God is unknowable. It doesn’t mean you can never know God. It doesn’t mean you can’t know God personally. You can. I hope you do know Him. If you don’t, I hope with all my heart you meet Him and come to know Him in a personal way today.

Paul understood that we do not and cannot know everything about God. It didn’t stop him, though, from telling the people of Athens what we can and do know about God. Paul made five key points in his message as he introduced the previously “unknown God” to his audience on Mars Hill. I want to mention them quickly.

### **FIVE AFFIRMATIONS ABOUT GOD**

First, in verse 24, Paul says that *God is the Creator of everything there is*. It is He who made the world and everything in it. The entire created universe owes its existence to God, who created it all.

Second, Paul says that *God is the Giver and Sustainer of life*. It is God, he says in verse 25, who “gives all men life and breath and everything else.” God is not dependent on us for anything. We are dependent on Him for everything. God does not need us. Nor does He need anything from us. But there is never a time, never a place or circumstance in life when we don’t need Him.

Third, says Paul, *God is sovereign over all nations and peoples* (verse 26). He made them all. He made *us* all. And He rules over all. Though we do not yet see it, what is stated in Revelation 11:15 *will* one day come to pass: The kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever. Amen? Amen.

Fourth, Paul declares in verses 28 and 29 that *God is the Father of us all and that we are all His offspring* – meaning that every human being is created in the image of God, and we owe our existence to Him. We are “God’s offspring” by virtue of God’s act of creating each of us. But God desires something more, and has done something more by sending Jesus His Son to live among us, to teach and heal and love, to reveal the heart of the Father, and to die for us, the righteous for the unrighteous, so that we may become God’s very own children, His beloved daughters and sons, through faith in Him and His saving work for us.

Fifth, as Paul says in verse 30 and 31, *God is the Judge of the whole world*. He will judge the world with justice, because He is just. His judgment is the perfect expression of His holy character. Though we do not know *when* the day of judgment will come, we do know the identity of the Judge. It is Jesus Christ our Lord, the eternal Son of God who became a man, lived a sinless life among us, was put to death on the cross for our sins, and rose again from the dead in the power of the true and living God.

The good news – and it is really good news – is that the Judge is also the Savior. The Savior is the Judge. All of us who truly trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord have nothing to fear on the day of judgment. The Judge, our Savior, has taken our guilt and punishment upon Himself. In His amazing grace (even the word “amazing” is not adequate to describe this grace), we have been declared “not guilty” – *forever* – in the court of our God and King.

I want to talk more next Sunday about the God in whom we believe, including, as I mentioned at the beginning, our belief in the triune nature of God: One God in three Persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – blessed Trinity.

### **QUESTION TO PONDER**

Until then, I want to leave you with some questions to ponder:

*Do you believe in God?*

*What kind of God (or god) do you believe in?*

*Do you believe in the one true and living God, the God we meet in the pages of the Bible, the God who has revealed Himself supremely in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God from all eternity and the only Savior of sinners?*

*What difference does it make whether or not you believe in God or any god?*

*What difference does believing in God – the true and living God – make in your life?*

I pray that believing in God, knowing God, loving God, and living for God as followers of Jesus His Son, will make all the difference in your life this week. And always. To the glory and praise of God.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.