

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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Building Blocks of Faith: One Way
Acts 17:16-31

Last week John kicked off a 5-week series we're calling "Building Blocks of the Faith," where we're trying to address some of the foundational questions that we think help to shape our identity as believers. It's our hope that thru this series we will learn together; that as we address important questions, questions that have particular relevance for us as a church community that is part of a larger culture, that we'll grow together in understanding. And for me, this series has struck a personal chord, as like many of you, these aren't hypothetical, theoretical questions that never see the light of day, but they're questions that people I love and care deeply about are struggling with. These are questions my own kids are asking.

A few weeks ago, in fact, I had a conversation with my son that went something like this: "Dad, you're a Christian. Raised in a Christian home, with a long pedigree of Christian service. You're a pastor. Grandpa Remy is a pastor. Great grandpa David Batupu was a Presbyterian minister in the Congo for decades before he died.

But here's my question: What if you'd been raised in, say, Saudi Arabia? What if all your friends were Muslim? What if praying five times a day facing Mecca was just the normal way things happened? Dad, would you still be a Christian, let alone a pastor? What if you'd been raised in India? What if you'd been raised by Buddhist parents? He says to me, "Dad, I'm not sure that I'm buying your reasons for believing in Christianity. If why you believe in Christianity is based pretty much on where you grew up, or where you're born, how can you say that Jesus Christ is the right and only way to God?" He says, "I'm not saying that I'm planning on becoming a Hindu or a Muslim or anything, but how can you expect others to believe what you believe, if you have not honestly and openly considered converting to Islam or Hinduism, or whatever?"

Well, I did what every good father would do. I told him to go ask his mother. No, I engaged him, mind-to-mind, heart to heart. Where I fell short, I told him I'd get back to him. In the meantime, I just want you guys to know that I'm going to go on study leave for about ten years or so, and then I'll come back here...

In all seriousness, this is one of the biggest challenges that thoughtful people face in our day. There are so many different religions and, if I'm honest, there are people who are way smarter and better than I am, who believe way differently than I do. So who am I to say that my faith is right, and their faith—at least on points where they disagree with me—is wrong?

There's nothing new under the sun. These questions aren't new, but for the last ten to fifteen years, this has become maybe the biggest issue of our times. Obviously, we can't address every aspect of this issue in one talk, but what I want to do today is identify and critique what I think is the most common response. I think the most common

response to this crisis in our day...in our culture...is the idea that all religions are pretty much the same, and that when you boil them all down, they're all basically saying the same thing.

Oprah Winfrey put it like this:

One of the biggest mistakes we can make is to believe that there is only one way. There are many diverse paths leading to God.

This is a very common idea. There's a corollary that I want to look at that generally goes with it. People will often assume that Christianity was formed in an isolated, unsophisticated, primitive environment where you could get everybody to believe the same ideas. The logic goes that if Jesus or Paul had lived instead in our multi-cultural, multi-faith global village, their spirit would have been such that they would recognize that all religions are pretty much saying the same thing. Their message would then have been very different.

To address that issue, what I want to do is go back and look at one of the most dramatic speeches ever made anywhere—a speech that Paul made to people at a place in Athens called the Areopagus—and see how isolated his world was or was not:

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned 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. ¹⁸ A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?" ²⁰ You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean."

All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.

²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands." [Acts 17: 16-24]

Let's start here. Whatever you think about this faith, the truth is that faith in Jesus was hammered out in the midst of a very pluralistic world—in the middle of Judaism, Greek and Roman polytheism, early Gnosticism and what are called "mystery religions," local cults in every major city, philosophies like stoicism and Epicureanism and compulsory worship of the emperor in the Roman Empire. Dan Clendenin, a religious historian, noted that scholars have documented enough names of God (of the Deity) in human religions to fill a book the size of the phone book in a large urban area. There were that many names of God. It may be there were more religious options available in Athens when Paul arrived there than at any other time in human history, including our own day.

In other words, Jesus and Paul, whatever else they were, were not isolated, unsophisticated rustics. They were fully aware that there were many faith options with many sincere followers,

and fully aware that making truth claims about God would be looked at as truly divisive. In fact, they both died for those claims. It was precisely in that pluralistic, multi-faith setting that one man stood up one day and said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” [John 14:6]

Jesus knew what He was saying. It was precisely in that kind of religious smorgasbord where Peter and John said, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under Heaven by which we must be saved.” [Acts 4:12]

They didn’t make these statements in an effort to control a vast church, or to dominate a culture. They controlled exactly nothing. But in this huge empire of great money and wealth, a few obscure, unimpressive voices stood up and said, “One way—one man—we can know God.”

Part of what is striking in Acts 17, and good for us to look at, is this combination in Paul of great humility yet great confidence...great boldness in Jesus. You have to picture this setting: Paul is a thoroughly Jewish rabbi by training and a Jesus follower. He goes to the Areopagus (Greek for “Mars Hill”), one of the most pluralistic religious settings ever. The most celebrated group of thinkers and seekers had met there for centuries. This is where Socrates would hang out and teach. The men gathered there were smart guys.

Part of what the group at the Areopagus would do was decide whether or not they would allow a new religion to be taught in Athens. These men were the gatekeepers. Historians say that they used three primary criteria for judging: first, the new religion had to have a champion—a spokesperson; second, the new god had to reside in Athens; third, the god had to benefit Athens in some way—bring rain, or cure arthritis, or something. They didn’t want anything that would trouble their prosperity.

For Paul, trained as a Jewish rabbi, to walk into the middle of all this paganism; it had to violate everything in him. The text tells us that he was bugged by this; it was hard for him to see all this. But notice how he doesn’t come with a sense of superiority. He honors their spirituality. He says, “I see that you are very religious. You take worship seriously.” He has taken time to read about and learn from their traditions.

It’s interesting that in this talk in Acts 17, it is the only time in Acts where Paul gives a message and doesn’t quote once from the Old Testament—from Torah. When he was in a synagogue, that’s about all he would do. Here, he doesn’t at all. He quotes from Greek writers. In this talk, he says, “For in Him (in God) we live and move and have our being.” [Acts 17:28] That is from a Greek, non-Christian, pagan source. As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring.”

Paul is not afraid to read and think about and learn from people from traditions very different than his own. It’s important for us to understand. Paul is saying that what these non-Christian Greek guys have said is true. We can learn from them. There’s a quality of humility in his attitude that I think is very winsome.

You know why people think being a Christian will make you arrogant, smug, simplistic or judgmental? It’s because sometimes Christians get arrogant, smug, simplistic or judgmental. Richard Foster tells this story:

A guy was going to jump off a bridge, when another man stopped him and said, “Don’t jump! God loves you.” Then he asked the jumper, “Are you a Christian?”

I am.

Me too.

Are you a Protestant or a Catholic?

I'm a Protestant.

What kind?

I'm a Baptist.

Me too.

Liberal Baptist or Conservative Baptist?

Conservative Baptist.

Me too.

Northern Conservative Baptist, or Southern Conservative Baptist?

Northern Conservative Baptist.

Me too.

Northern Conservative Baptist, Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist, New England Region?

Great Lakes Region.

Me too.

Northern Conservative Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1898, or Northern Conservative Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912?

Council of 1912.

Die, heretic!

And he pushes him right off the bridge.

It happens that way in churches sometimes. There can be a spirit of, "Are you in my little camp or are you not?" Paul doesn't do that. Amazingly enough, he walks into this pagan place with this amazing spirit of humility that is very disarming. He honors their spirituality. He learns from their teachers. But here is what he does not say. He does not say, "You know, what you believe and what I believe are just different ways of saying the same thing." There is great humility, but there is also great clarity and boldness with Paul. He says to them:

Therefore 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 such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent. For he 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 all people by raising Jesus from the dead. [Acts 17: 29-31]

Paul affirms common ground. He comes as a learner. He comes in humility, but he is very bold. He says, "It's not that I'm bright. This is not anything about me or what I think, but the truth is all religions are not the same."

This is part of what I'd really like for us to become clear on. You hear this so much in our world. They are the same. They are just not.

For instance, Judaism, Christianity and Islam say there is one God. There are forms of Hinduism that say there are over 300,000 different gods. They're not saying the same thing. Christianity says that Jesus is the Son of God. Islam says that to claim that God has a Son is blasphemous. Disagree with one, or disagree with both of them—they are not saying the same thing. Moses said that God is the fulfillment of our desires. Buddha says that nirvana, which is a state not a person, is the elimination of the fulfillment of our desires. They are not the same thing.

Here's what I think is often behind the idea that all religions are saying the same thing. In our day, I think many people believe that although religions may *believe* they are making truth claims, no one can really know the truth about God. No one can really know the truth about what comes after this life. Science can establish some things, but nobody can really know the truth about God. So it's OK to say what works for *you*. That's fine. But you should not try to convince somebody else that it is true.

There's a poem by John Godfrey Saxe that was written back in the 1800s. It's called "*Six Blind Men and the Elephant*." Maybe you've read it; it's the story about six blind guys who are supposed to describe an elephant. Since they can't see, each of them touches a part of the elephant. Each man concludes that the elephant must be like the part that I'm touching.

One of them touches the elephant's side and says, "The elephant must be like a wall."
One of them touches the elephant's tusk and says, "The elephant must be like a spear."
One of them touches the tail and says, "The elephant is like a rope."
Another touches the ear and says, "It must be like a fan."

The writer of that poem says that they all touched one thing, and they all thought that the whole elephant was like the part that they had a hold of. Each one disputed loud and long. Although each was partly right, all were in the wrong. All of them were in the wrong, except for one guy. One guy saw the whole truth about the elephant. Who was that one guy? John Godfrey Saxe, the guy who wrote the poem.

The claim that says, "No religion can know the truth about God..." That's also a truth claim. Science can't prove that. That's an article of faith. The "*Six Blind Men and the Elephant*" was written to be a metaphor about religious knowledge. I don't know if this will make sense or not, but part of what I was thinking about this week is that in the poem, Confucius and Buddha and Jesus are all the "blind men" who are mistaken, while the one guy who sees the whole elephant is John Godfrey Saxe, the guy who wrote the poem. I think it's a little patronizing to say, "All religious leaders and all religious truth claims are wrong, and I know the truth about this."

Part of the problem with religion in the generic sense—and part of the reason that I don't think it's likely to be true—is, I think, that if there is a God, that God would want to be known. Generic religion doesn't save anybody, and it doesn't slay anybody. It doesn't revive and redeem anybody. It doesn't produce any profits. What happens in generic religion is people get to use it to pursue the agendas that they already have.

In the late 80s a Berkeley sociologist named Robert Bellah wrote a book that's become a classic, called *Habits of the Heart*. Anybody read that book? It's about religious faith in America, how rampant individualism is and about how it leads its followers to be outside community, doing "religion a la carte." Included is an interview with a woman named "Sheila" in which she is asked about her faith.

Here is what she says, "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. I call my faith 'Sheila-ism.' Just my own little voice. 'Be gentle with yourself.'"

Well, if your religion is named for yourself, you might want to wonder about how smart your "god" really is. I think one of the reasons why generic religion tends to be popular is it hardly ever confronts people with the profound brokenness of the human condition—which I think is a reality, but you'll have to decide about this for yourselves. The Bible calls this brokenness "sin."

Generic religion almost never talks about that. It doesn't have much of a prophetic edge to it. We kind of like that, because we don't like to have to think about ourselves in distressing ways. We try really hard to avoid the truth about our condition.

There's a story about these two brothers who lived really raunchy lives. They were just a mess. One of them dies suddenly and the other one decides he wants a little "religion" around the death, so he goes to the minister of some church and tells him, "My brother just died. Will you preach at his funeral service?" The minister knows all about this brother, but the brother says to the minister, "I have just one request. Would you refer to my brother as a saint?" The minister says, "I'll see what I can do." He's not sure how he's going to make that happen. But he figures out a way. While preaching, he says to the congregation, "I want you to know that this man was a con artist, swindler, a cheat and a liar, but compared to his brother, he was a saint."

Saint compared to what? That's the question.

Explore it all you want to, but what you will discover is that generic religion ends up being a faith without holiness, without justice, without a prophetic edge, without accountability to a holy God, without a transcendent sense of wonder and awe, without a profound sense of sin...

Remember those words of Isaiah? "Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips; I live in the midst of a people of unclean lips." "I just do. That's just a fact." "I've seen a holy God," Isaiah says. That God, that faith is big enough to turn the world upside down and to interrupt people's agendas. Generic religion never has a profound sense of human brokenness and sin. I know I'm messed up. You know, in your heart of hearts, that you need rescue. And generic religion, oddly enough, because it is without that sense of sin, is, therefore, without a profound sense of grace. It doesn't save anybody. A religion a la carte lacks this power and always ends up trivializing itself.

Paul gets up at Mars Hill and says, "It's not about what you see in all these other altars where people are trying to figure out how to get to God. God has revealed Himself. God has made Himself known. What's at the heart of what I proclaim to you is like nothing else. It is not primarily about an idea or a doctrine or a practice. It's about a person. Jesus is it. He is just IT."

Many of the mainline denominations, including the Presbyterian Church USA, have been dwindling in size for decades. There are many reasons for that, and I don't presume to know them all. But I often wonder if part of the answer doesn't lie here.

Sometimes, in an effort to make the Christian faith feel less offensive or less exclusive, more palatable, you will often hear people in the generic religion camp talk about "Jesus and his teaching." This is often done in respectful ways, but Jesus will always be downgraded in religion a la carte, to being another prophet lumped in the same category with Mohammed or Buddha or Moses or Confucius. This is exactly what Paul says cannot be done, because Jesus is IT.

He says Jesus is God's man. The whole thing hinges on His resurrection. It really happened. It's not just that Jesus said some wise thing. It's not just that Jesus "works" for Paul, and it is not that His church, or tradition, or hymns are comforting for some people. He's IT.

There are a lot of questions that I don't know the answers to...questions like, "What about the people who never heard of him?" But what the Bible confronts us all with is, "Now you've heard about Jesus. Now what are you going to do?"

I'd encourage you not to try to add Jesus to the "menu" as one more "flavor."

When I think of Paul at the Areopagus, speaking with humility and boldness to that pluralistic group, it reminds me of this story you may have heard:

A Navy captain was at the helm of a ship. He sees the light on the horizon, and it's on a collision course with his ship.

He sends it a message: Change your course 10 degrees to the west.

He gets a reply back: Change *your* course 10 degrees to the west!

He sends another message: I'm a Captain of the U.S. Navy. Suggest you change *your* course now!

Another message comes back: I'm a Seaman Second Class in the U.S. Navy. I suggest you change *your* course now.

He sends a final message: I command a battleship. I'm not changing course.

Then, he receives a final message: I oversee a lighthouse. Your call, Sir.

"Reality...truth," Paul says, "is like a lighthouse." There was a day when this man stood up and said, "I am the light of the world." Buddha never said that. Confucius never said that. Mohammed never said that. Jesus said that. "I am the way. I am the truth. I am the life." Your call.

The Biblical language for "change your course" is repentance. Steer your life now in view of the reality of the light of the world.

Lot of questions I don't understand yet. I'm just a finite mind, but I do know this: religion a la carte is not enough to sustain anybody.

And if there is a God in this universe, it has to be a God who is worthy of being the Father that Jesus spoke about, who would want to be known by people, who would want to make the way to Himself available to everybody. Paul says that's exactly who He is, and that's exactly what He has done.

It didn't convince everybody in Paul's day any more than it will convince everybody in our day. Peter gave a message in Acts 2, and 5000 people came to faith in Jesus. Paul gave this message in Athens, and do you know how many converts we are told about at the end of this message? We're told about the names of two converts.

It's not about the number to Paul. His job was just to talk about the Light and he did it with great joy. That's our motivation. We want to do the job that Paul did. We just want to be in the Light and let folks know about the Light.

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.