

AN UNKNOWN GOD
05.10.26 Acts 17: 22-31
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LOST IN THOUGHT AND ATHENS

What do you say to the Athenians? What can you say that they haven't already heard?

Paul had his work cut out for him. He was, himself, a Greek, so he knew a thing or two about the Greek people. But Athens was a whole different ball game.

Athens was the seat of academia. Athens was the place where all the great thinkers had their beginning. Philosophy was born here. The theater had its genesis in this great city. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle thought, and taught and wrote here. Homer dictated his epic poems, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, and Euripides penned his dramas here: *Andromache*, *Cyclops*, the devastatingly sad *Trojan Women*, and a dozen others. Pericles, the greatest man in the history of the city, led Athens through four wars, and it was here that he laid the foundations of what would become known as democracy. It was here that he made his most famous, brilliant and beautiful speeches, speeches that school children memorized, as Paul well knew having been raised a Greek, himself.

The more he thought about it the more he wondered about his decision to speak to them about Christianity.

Somehow, he had managed to get a 15, maybe 20-minute spot on the agenda of the city leaders' meeting tomorrow morning at the Areopagus, the tall hill near the middle of town where the city leaders met to transact their public business. The elders would be there. The rich and influential people would certainly be present. And, because it was a public meeting there would be some citizens from the city and even some hangers on, people who just came for the entertainment value.

Athenians were generally knowledgeable and skilled in critical thinking. And they were religious to a fault.

Paul probably decided to take a walk through the city in the hopes that inspiration and insight would come to him as he made his way through the narrow streets. As he walked, he could not help but notice how religious the Athenians were. Every corner, every nook and cranny, was decorated with an altar or a bust of one from their pantheon of gods and goddesses. Here a crude bust of Zeus, god of weather and god above all gods. There, an altar to Hera, goddess of family and marriage. In front of this merchant, statuettes of Aphrodite and Eros, goddess and god of love and sexuality and fertility.

Everywhere one might look there was a tribute not just to the twelve major gods and goddesses but to all the smaller and minor gods, so many in number that two thousand years hence, when historians looked back upon this time, they would not be able to count them all.

Paul shook his head in wonder at the raw creativity of the human theological mind. But then something caught his eye and made him stop mid-stride.

Before him there was an altar that was not adorned as thoroughly or as beautifully as all the others he had seen. It was little more than a small stone table with a vase of fresh flowers set upon it. And above the it, etched in the stone were these words, written in an amateur hand: "To an unknown god."

An unknown God.

How strangely beautiful that these Athenians, who were such great thinkers, so well read, so highly educated, so thoroughly schooled in all of the arts and sciences, so sure of themselves in so many ways, should place an altar like this in their city. This one altar bore witness to the fact that the Athenians were willing to leave a door open to the unknown. They were willing to admit that they might not have all of the answers, that their theology might be incomplete.

They were still open to new ideas, to new insights, to new lessons. They were still, in a word, **SEEKING.**

Paul smiled to himself. They were open and they were still seeking. In the wall that was the vast Greek polytheism, this was the crack wherein Paul would place his seeds of Christianity in hopes that they might grow and, eventually, break down or overcome the wall entirely.

Now, if you will, let's leave Paul there and walk forward with me for about 2,000 years, to today.

THE BENEDICT OPTION

Rod Dreher is a prolific writer, editor and blogger for *The American Conservative*. He's one of those conservatives like George Will, who is so smart and such a good writer that I don't mind reading his stuff, even when I disagree with him. He's what I call a "thinking person's conservative." In his book, *The Benedict Option*, he predicts an impending return of America to the Dark Ages, especially where Christianity is concerned and he offers what he believes is an appropriate response of Christians to this existential threat.

In a nutshell, here is his argument:

The culture war has been lost by the conservative right. Religious liberals and secular humanists have won. This is clearly evident, he says, where human sexuality is concerned. "L.G.B.T. activism is the tip of the spear at our throats," he opines in the book. "The struggle over gay rights is ... threatening religious liberty, putting Christian merchants out of business, threatening the tax-exempt status and accreditation of Christian schools and colleges."

He argues that "...because of their views on L.G.B.T. issues, Orthodox Christians and Jews will soon be banned from many professions and corporations. 'Blacklisting will be real,' he says. We are entering a new Dark Age. 'There are people alive today who may live to see the effective death of Christianity within our civilization.'"

It is futile to continue fighting the culture wars, he says.

Instead, conservative Christians (and this is clearly who he is writing to) should do as St. Benedict did when the Roman Empire was collapsing all around him. They should withdraw from mainstream culture, take their kids out of public schools, and move into separate, conservative religious enclaves where they can concentrate on purifying, deepening, and preserving their so-called orthodox faith.

What he does not seem to see is that there are some huge cracks in this plan, not the least of which is that it goes diametrically against the Great Commission, which Jesus delivered to his disciples in Matthew 28:19-20. (*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*)

While Jesus is calling Christians to go into the world and witness to those who have not heard the good news of God's grace as it has been expressed in Jesus Christ, Mr. Dreher is calling conservative Christians to do the exact opposite: leave the world behind, go and live with people who agree with you and reinforce your conservative beliefs by not allowing yourselves and certainly your children to hear or read or be challenged by any ideas that run contrary to yours.

I could probably end the sermon right here. The Benedict option is unbiblical and unchristian. But there are some other things in it that deserve attention

The **second** error he makes in this book is that of sweeping generalizations that are inevitably inaccurate. While there are some liberal/secular purists who shout down differing opinions and want to force Orthodox Christian bakers to work at gay weddings, against their conscience, these are a very small minority. As columnist David Brooks rightly points out in an op-ed essay: "Most Americans are not hell-bent on destroying religious institutions. If anything, they are spiritually hungry and open to religious conversation." Most of the time they are not so much against religion and religious belief and action as they are, simply, indifferent to it. It's not that they hate thinking about it, it's more that it just doesn't occur to them to think about religion at all.

It is true that Christianity, especially that of the old mainline protestant churches, is shrinking. More than 25 percent of American adults answer "none" when asked for their religious affiliation, up from 16 percent in 2007. And while some simply don't care at all about religion, many describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious," the modern equivalent of believing in the possible existence of "an unknown god."

They are not attacking organized religion so much as they are simply walking away from it.

The **third**, flaw in Dreher's Benedict Option is well spoken by David Brooks. Over the course of history, he says, American culture "has tolerated slavery, sexual brutality, and the genocide of the Native Americans" and still managed to deflect any threatened Dark Age. So, is 2026 to be remembered in history as the year that ushered in a new Dark Ages because we let people marry people they loved, regardless of gender? Probably not.

If slavery and McCarthyism and the Great Depression and sending people into concentration camps because they were of Asian heritage, and the near obliteration of the native peoples of this continent, a horrible civil war, and being in an almost constant state of war since the country was founded has not destroyed us, then it is unlikely that same sex marriage will. Insisting that it will is more of a conservative wish dream than it is a divinely inspired prophecy.

The **fourth** error that Dreher makes is what I refer to as the “binary error”. He assumes that all of Christendom can be neatly divided into two camps: the orthodox, conservative believers who are the real Christians and the liberal, progressive people who are false or fake Christians. This kind of thinking has lately become known as “binary thinking” and it comes from the world of technology. Computers have taught us to think as they think. I don’t know a lot about computers, but I know that everything that they do is programmed into them through a series of ones and zeroes. Everything in our computers is boiled down to the various arrangements of those two digits. If you spend a lot of time writing programs that consist of ones and zeroes it’s easy to begin seeing everything as binary – either a one or a zero – hero or coward, gay or straight, Democrat or Republican, conservative or liberal, carnivorous or vegetarian.

Life, however, is not so simple and easily divided. Human beings are complex entities who defy attempts to categorize them into neat, binary groupings. Liberals often disagree with other liberals and conservatives disagree with conservatives. If this is not so, why do we have so many Baptist churches in this county? When I was serving a church in the Delhi area of Cincinnati there was a liberal United Church of Christ that had split three times in twenty years over issues that many of the current members couldn’t even remember. The pastor used to joke that, “Our main mission is to seed new churches. We don’t do it intentionally. It just seems to be the way it works out every eight to ten years.”

I meet each month with a group of pastors who would all probably self-identify as liberals, but we all fall at different points on the liberal continuum. Some are way down on the left while others are just this side of center. We come together to study the scriptures because even though we are all liberals, we don’t always agree on how this or that passage of the Bible should be interpreted, and we hope to gain some new insights from each other’s point of view.

The Benedict Option is simply an overreaction to a division in our culture that is bridgeable through simple human interaction, communication, accommodation, and reasonable compromise.

CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT

The answer to the changes that are taking place in American culture is not to run away and hide in caves hoping to find or create some pure and unadulterated form of the faith as the Benedictines attempted to do during the Middle Ages. Rather, it is to throw ourselves into creative engagement. Religious people in our time win nothing by fighting secular purism with religious purism. Self-segregationists, Brooks points out, always end up fostering narrowness, prejudice and moral arrogance, and “closing off the dynamic creativity of a living faith.”

Our right response to the current culture, he says, is to throw ourselves more deeply into friendship with complexity, with different believers and atheists, liberals and conservatives, the dissimilar and unlike.”

The real enemy of our faith is not the sexual revolution, the secular culture, or the liberality of our culture. It is a purism – religious, political, philosophical purism – that does not and cannot tolerate difference because it does not have the humility to humbly accept that truth is often a mystery that cannot be proved or disproved but can only be accepted and embraced.

The answer to that stifling, demanding, elitist purism, be it religious or secular, is not to argue it into submission or to walk away and leave it alone in the desert heat. The answer to the demand for purity in theology and any other aspect of our lives is to love one another as Jesus first loved us, and to share with the world our stories of how we were loved, not because of the purity of our theology, but because of the amazing grace of a living and loving God.

The search for the unknown god of our culture is expressed as “spiritual but not religious” and “moralistic, therapeutic deism.” People who express their spiritual preference in these two are, in reality, expressing a spiritual/religious hunger, a need that is not being met in traditional Christianity.

May God grant us the wisdom of Paul that we might speak effectively and convincingly of that God who fills this gap in the popular theology of our culture.

AMEN