

PAUL ON MARS HILL

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Everybody has a world view. The way you and I look at life. The way we perceive things. Everyone has a lens that we look at the world through. And the way we look at the world makes all the difference in the world how we define reality, and how we talk and act and how we treat each other. Everybody has a lens through which they interpret how the sun shines, and why bad things happen, and what life is really all about, and what their place is in the universe. Everybody has a world view.

We Christians are called to have a biblical world view. Which means that we interpret all of life through the lens of God's Word, which we believe is the infallible, inspired Word. Not everybody has that view, but we as Christians are called to have that Biblical world view. We have a Biblical world view that speaks to the culture around us. We believe the Bible really is the very Word of God, and our mission is to carry out the Great Commission. And to do that means we need to engage the non-Biblical culture around us. But how do we do that? How do we bring a Biblical world view to bear upon a world that certainly is not in sync with that view?

This whole culture and world view thing is really sort of a Catch 22. How you and I look at the world is largely shaped by the culture around us, and our culture is largely shaped by our world view. You and I as Christians really need to understand this whole culture thing. You and I are immersed in culture, just like a fish is immersed in water. The culture around us is made up of the sum of everything that is out there. You need to know that culture is not a neutral thing. It's a part of the fallen world. The danger for you and me is to become so attached and so enamored with the culture around us that we actually become captive to it. When that happens, the first victim is our world view. We begin to get out of touch with reality—with God's reality.

How do we make sure we don't get into that trap? How do we break this Catch 22? The way to do it is to initially base your world view on something from outside of the culture. In Scripture, God comes to you and me, from outside of time and space and human ideology, and He gives you and me the lens through which we can rightly see what is real and true. To have a Biblical world view is to view the entirety of

life through the lens of God's Word.

Now Paul had a Biblical world view, and he winds up on Mars hill in Athens engaging the non-Biblical culture around him with that Biblical world view. But he is only able to do that because Paul has immersed himself in the Word of God. Paul has been a life-long student of the Bible, and that has shaped his reality. We say "Yes, we've got a Biblical world view." But the truth is, folks, many if not most Christians today are tremendously under-educated when it comes to the Bible, thus depriving them of the critical tools they need to bring their faith in a relevant way to engage the culture around them.

Let me give you an example. Two-thirds of committed Christians say that there is no such thing as absolute truth. Now tell me, what is shaping their world view, the Bible, or culture? Or how about us? How do we define what makes life truly meaningful?

How in the world are you and I in a real, effective way, able to take our Biblical faith and engage a post-modern, egocentric, post-Christian, techno-geek culture without it getting the best of us? Well, I'll tell you: the same way Paul addressed a pre-modern, egocentric, pre-Christian techno-Greek culture there on Mars hill. You immerse yourself in the Word of God. You become a life long student of the Bible, and you make a commitment—a commitment that you are going to place God's Word above every other thing in your life in terms of the lens through which you will view life. And if you and I don't do that, then forget about having a Biblical world view.

Many are enamored with the scientific approach to life. Everything has to be confirmed by research and the scientific method. There comes a time as a Christian when you have to say, "Am I going to go with a human endeavor (which is what science is) or am I going to step out in faith and place the Word of God above science as the primary lens through which I view my own life and the world around me?" I made a commitment to place God's Word above everything. I was worried about all the conflicts that I would encounter. Would I have to check my brains at the door and just deny a lot of things? No, I don't have to check my brains at the door. What I find is that much of science is getting off its high hobby horse and realizing that it is not such a closed system out there after all.

But you know, there is also a lot of talk out there today about culture wars. And sadly, a lot of Christians are buying in to that kind of terminology, that kind of ideology. Paul stands on Mars Hill in Athens

not seeing the Greeks as his enemy. He is standing on Mars Hill bringing a Biblical world view to those people there out of love for them, because he cares about them. And yet there are a whole lot of Christians out there who view the non-Biblical culture around us as the opposition. My friends, when you and I begin to see Atheists and New-Agers and proponents of abortion or champions of sexual licentiousness (be it homosexual or heterosexual); if we begin to view drug dealers and people like that as the enemy, then we have bought a world view from the culture around us, not a biblical world view.

Paul stands on Mars Hill and he sees that location not as a battlefield but as a mission field. You and I are to love those people who have a non-Biblical world view.

Satan and his legions are our enemies. Folks who have a non-Biblical world view are held hostage to Satan. We as Christians bring a Biblical world view to bear on the culture around us because we are on a loving, liberation mission.

As Christians, we are not to circle the wagons and to go into a defensive posture. We are to go right to the heart of the non-Biblical culture around us. Paul doesn't stay back in Jerusalem. He goes to the Areopagus there on Mars Hill in Athens. He takes on the very cultural elite of that day. And he does so, why? Because he knows the Christian faith is true. He's met Jesus Christ at more than second hand. And he knows the Christian faith can hold its own on a field like that. And it can, friends. For 2000 years the Christian faith has won some of the greatest minds to Christ. For 2000 years the Christian faith has been an anvil that has worn out countless hammers of human ideology. The Christian faith can hold its own.

You and I are to bring a Biblical world view into the marketplace of ideas. We are not to ram it down anybody's throat, we are not to force it upon anyone. Paul, on Mars Hill, proclaims a Biblical world view out there and asks others to consider Jesus. We don't need to be defensive. It's all up to God anyway to bring somebody to Christ.

Acts 17:17: "Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him."

When Paul came to Athens, his spirit was stirred, powerfully agitated, because he saw the city wholly given to idolatry, or full of idols. Athens was then the metropolis of the world, the seat of all learning and art. It no doubt had more in it to attract the eye than all

the rest of the world. Livy says that it “was full of the images of gods and men, adorned with every variety of material, and with all the skill of art.” Another writer humorously said that “it was easier to find a god than a man there.” Paul was educated and refined; he doubtless had an eye for the beautiful, both in nature and art. But his was the true culture and refinement—the culture that comes from an acquaintance with God. The vanities of Athens had no attraction for him. He could think only of the one thing—that all these were leading from God. How many Christians are there at the present time who, like Paul, are agitated over the wickedness that abounds, rather than attracted by and lost in admiration for the splendor which is often only a covering for vice? In this age of the world especially the Christian has something far greater to attract the attention than mere sight-seeing.

As we take the gospel out today, we will encounter a wide variety of erroneous understandings of God. Secular humanists think that the idea of God is a crutch, perhaps needed by weak people, but not by self-made people like themselves. Atheists and scientific materialists claim that science has proved that there is no God and that the existence of the world can be accounted for without bringing God into the equation. Many Buddhists think of the gods as inferior to the Buddha, perhaps needed to perform small favors but certainly not worthy of the position of Lord of their lives. Animists and polytheists see several gods responsible for different aspects of life, who can be appeased by following magic-like formulas. Many Buddhists and Hindus, and even some Roman Catholics, have given God-like status to images of their gods or to holy men. Muslims see God as so transcendent and distant from humanity that we can only be slaves, depending on his mercy, not children basking in His love. Pantheistic Hindus and New Age adherents see God as being in everything, including oneself.

“Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoics, encountered him.” Acts 17:18. The Epicureans derived their name from Epicurus, who lived about 300 years before Christ. “They denied that the world was created by God, and that the gods exercised any care or providence over human affairs, and also the immortality of the soul. [They denied all future existence.] One of the distinguishing doctrines of Epicurus was that pleasure was the . . . chief good, and that virtue was to be practiced only as it contributed to pleasure.” It is easy to see to what practices such doctrines would lead. The Stoics believed that the universe was created by God, but that all things

were fixed by fate; that even God was under the dominion of fate. It will be readily seen that Paul's teaching would be diametrically opposed to such doctrines as these.

We should not fail to notice the adroitness and skill with which Paul introduced his subject. The philosophers had said, "He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods." Acts 17:18. Now the Athenians were very jealous of the worship of their gods. They greatly surpassed all others in their zeal for religion. It was dangerous for anyone to speak against their idol worship. About 400 years before, Socrates, one of their own philosophers, the wisest and most highly esteemed of any among them, had been put to death because they thought he was unsettling the minds of the young, and teaching disrespect for the gods. Now if Paul had introduced this subject bluntly, it is doubtful if he would have been allowed to speak at all. Thus he would have defeated his own purpose. So he took them on their own ground. He said, "I perceive that ye are somewhat superstitious." The word "superstitious," as used here, means "excessively religious." He had seen an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown God;" so he said, "Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you." They could find no fault with him for teaching them more perfectly concerning a god whom they professed to worship. But this means he was able to preach to them further, "Jesus and the resurrection." Paul showed on this occasion the wisdom of the serpent, in winning souls to Christ, as the apostles had been commanded. Those who labor in these days would do well to learn a lesson from this. And yet, how many are there who would not compromise the truth should they be placed in Paul's circumstances, and attempt to do this as he did?

It is not to be supposed that we have the whole report of Paul's sermon, for it would not have taken him two minutes to deliver it. This report gives only the heads of his discourse. It is a perfectly legitimate thing to prove the existence of God, from nature, and this is what Paul did. Having proved the existence of God, and his nature, he introduced the gospel in these words: God "now commandeth all men everywhere to repent; because he hath appointed a day in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, and that he hath raised him from the dead." Acts 17:30, 31. We do not think a more powerful gospel sermon could have been preached than Paul preached at Athens.

The Greeks had their altar to an unknown God, "We're not sure he

exists, but in case he does, we want to cover all our bases.” Paul says, “Let me tell you about the God who does exist, and you can know Him, and you’ve got all the proof you need in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

To engage the non-Biblical culture around us we need to look for points of contact. Another way of saying it is that we need to “plunder the Egyptians.” Look for truths in the culture that we can use as vehicles to carry the gospel.

Most of our world views are being formed much more by television, much more by movies, than by the Bible. And so it is dangerous to live on the edge of trying to witness to a culture that has probably got more ammunition against you than you’ve been storing up for your own stability. So you’ve got to be careful. But we’ve got to learn to speak their language to make those points of contact.

Acts 17:24 “God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands.”

Heaven is His throne, and the earth is His footstool. David knew that the only real dwelling-place he could find for the mighty God of Jacob was a humble and a contrite heart.

“For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.” Isa. 57:15.

This is the habitation that every soul may find for the Lord, in which He will dwell in all His fullness. And there need be no delay, because He is waiting to enter. He says, “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock; if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me.” Rev. 3:20. “Today, if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts.” It is every reader’s blessed privilege to find such an habitation for the mighty God of Jacob before he sleeps.

The Apostle Paul affirms that God is “not far from every one of us.” Acts 17:27. He is not so far away that He may not be found by anyone who will earnestly seek Him. The apostle says that God “hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed and the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him.” Acts 17:26. 27. He

represents them as groping about in obscurity, with but a ray or two of light to guide them in the search; and yet, even under these circumstances they are able to find God, because He is not far away from everyone of us. He guides our steps to Him in the darkness and in the light.

But God does not will that man should live in darkness concerning Him. He would have them live in the light, where they can behold His divine presence, and rejoice in a clear view of His attributes of mercy and love. He ordained it so in the beginning, but men turned away from Him, because they “did not like to retain God in their knowledge,” and they “became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.” Rom. 1:21, 28. They “have sought out many inventions” (Eccl. 7:29) and their inventions, have turned their minds away from the things of God, and shut out His glory from their view.

And nowhere has human invention done more to darken the spiritual eyesight than in the very means which men employ today for the worship and service of God. Through the creeds and dogmas, the forms and ceremonies, the orders and offices which pertain to present modes of divine worship, people see God but dimly, if indeed they are able to see Him at all. They interpose before them an opaque theological body, by which the pure light of heaven is constantly kept in eclipse. The true character of God, and the nature of the plan which He has devised for man’s salvation, have been lost to view, and all sorts of vague and erroneous ideas have sprung up, to waste and pervert the spiritual energies.

To interpose something between man and God, between the worshiper and the divine object of his worship, has been the constant aim of Satan in his opposition to the plan of salvation. He wants folks to look to some earthly object instead of to Christ their Redeemer, or to look at Him through some medium of human invention, which will darken and distort their view. He is pleased to have folks believe that they cannot come to Christ directly, but must approach Him through some means devised by that church. He does not care particularly what object that is brought between man and God, whether a priest, or a bishop, or a pope, or the Virgin Mary, or the “saints,” or anything that is less than God, for all these serve his purpose of causing worshipers to lose sight of the Being whom alone he professes to worship. And when they have lost sight of God and of His character, Satan’s aim is to insert himself into the place of God, and present his

own character and requirements in the place of God's, so that in thinking to worship and serve God they will in reality be worshipping and serving him. This is what will inevitably result when folks allow their sight to be turned away from God and fixed upon something else.

The Christian world needs to learn today that God is not a great way off from humanity, shut out by a great church with its forms and ceremonies, and a long array of "saints" and bishops and ecclesiastical paraphernalia, but that He is near to His creatures, even within the sound of the voice and the sight of the eye. All that is necessary to bring Him in view is simple faith, and not the faith of some great divine or some ecclesiastical body, but that of the individual. "He that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him." Heb. 11:6. These are the conditions of seeking and finding God. They are such as any individual who wills to can readily perform.

Christ is the true Shepherd. He speaks to His sheep, and they hear and know His voice. John 10:4, 5. We are to look to Christ, and from Him receive our light.

Yes, we may make that response, but where shall we look for Him, that we may see His face? Have no anxiety on that score; the Lord is looking for you; and all you have to do to see Him is to look up. God has placed us where we are "that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He be not far from every one of us." Acts 17:27. There is danger that we may not feel after Him; but if we do reach out our hand, we are sure straightway to find Him.

In the Highlands of Scotland, a sheep would often wander off into the rocks and get into places that they couldn't get out of. The grass on these mountains is very sweet and the sheep like it, and they will jump down ten or twelve feet, and then they can't jump back again, and the shepherd hears them bleating in distress. They may be there for days, until they have eaten all the grass. The shepherd will wait until they are so faint they cannot stand, and then they will put a rope around him, and he will go over and pull that sheep up out of the jaws of death. "Why don't they go down there when the sheep first gets there?" "Ah!" He said, "they are so very foolish they would dash right over the precipice and be killed if they did!" And that is the way with men; they won't go back to God till they have no friends and have lost everything. If you are a wanderer I tell you that the Good Shepherd

will bring you back the moment you have given up trying to save yourself and are willing to let Him save you His own way.

Then Paul quoted one of their Greek poets, who had said, "For we are also his offspring," and placed upon it the stamp of truth, by saying, "Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device." Acts 17:27-29. Every movement of men, and every breath, is the working of the external power of God. Thus the eternal power and divinity of God are manifest to every man. Not that man is in any sense divine, or that he has any power in himself. Quite the contrary. Man is like the grass. "Every man at his best state is altogether vanity." Ps. 39:5. The fact that man is nothing in himself, and even "less than nothing, and vanity," is evidence of the power of God manifested in him.

Look at the tiny blade of grass just pushing its way through the hard ground to the sunlight. It is a very frail thing. Pull it up, and you will see that it has not power to stand alone. Even scrape the soil away from it as it stands in the earth, and it will at once lose its upright position. It depends upon the soil to hold it up, and yet it is pushing its way to the surface through that very hard soil. Dissect it as carefully as you please, and you will find nothing to indicate the possession of power. Rub it between your fingers, and you will see that there is scarcely any substance to it. It is about as frail a thing as there is in nature, and yet it will often remove quite large stones that are in the way of its growth. Whence comes this power? It is not inherent in the grass, but is nothing less than the power of the life of God, working according to his word, which in the beginning said, "Let the earth bring forth grass."

Acts 17:30 "And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent."

God calls on "all men everywhere to repent." To all men comes the proclamation, "Be ye reconciled to God." To all He says, "Choose ye this day whom ye will serve." No man can serve God and mammon at the same time. He must choose one or the other. But the freedom and power of choice are given to man, so that he need not serve Satan unless he wishes to. The service of God leads to life; but "the wages of sin is death." Rom. 6:23.

Wabush, a town in a remote portion of Labrador, Canada, was completely isolated for some time. But recently a road was cut

through the wilderness to reach it. Wabush now has one road leading into it, and thus, only on one road leading out. If someone would travel the unpaved road for six to eight hours to get into Wabush, there is only way he or she could leave—by turning around.

Each of us, by birth, arrives in a town called Sin. As in Wabush, there is only one way out—a road built by God himself. But in order to take that road, one must first turn around. That complete about face is what the Bible calls repentance, and without it, there's no way out of town.

Acts 17:31: "Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead."

What shall be the standard of the final judgment? If we are to know that for certain things God will bring us into judgment, it must be that we can know what to do in order to secure a favorable decision. We have already learned that, being wholly dependent on God, we are bound to conform to his will in every particular; therefore we must conclude that God's will is to be the standard of judgment. This conclusion is supported by the words in the Lord's prayer, which indicate that when God's kingdom comes his will will be done by all.

What then is the will of God, by which we are to be judged? It must be that the law of God contains the will of God. David uttered prophetically in behalf of Christ: "Then said I, Lo, I come; in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God; yea, thy law is within my heart." Ps. 40:7, 8. It was Christ's delight—more than his meat or drink—to do the will of God. He ever did the will of the Father. This was because the law of God was in his heart, so that all his actions were spontaneously in harmony with it. But acting in harmony with the law of God, was doing the will of God; therefore the law of God is identical with his will.

Acts 17:32 "And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter."

17:33 So Paul departed from among them.

Acts 17:34: "Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them."

The first reaction is that a bunch of them sneer at Paul. They reject

him outright. But you know sometimes those are the people closest to the Kingdom. They are the ones most pierced by the gospel. The ones I really worry about are the people who are terminally polite. They say, “This is interesting, we’d like to hear about it, but some other time.” But then, there are also some people who have a tremendous, life shattering, world altering paradigm shift. They come to faith. In fact two of them are named—a man named Dionysius, who is part of the Areopagus, part of the cultural elite. These folks change from a non-Biblical world view to a Biblical world view. They go from illusion to reality, they go from eternal death to eternal life. There were mixed reactions.

Just before World War II in Itasca, Texas, there was a school fire that took the lives of 261 children. It was a horrifying tragedy. After the war Itasca built a new school with the finest sprinkler system in the world. Never again would the citizens of Itasca be caught with such a tragedy on their hands. Honor students were selected to take citizens of the community on tours through the new school, to show them the finest sprinkler system ever assembled. The town continued to grow, and seven years after the new school was built an addition was needed. As the new construction began, it was discovered that the sprinkler system was never connected.

Some of us need to come into better connection with the Source of truth, Jesus Christ. You and I are called to live on the cutting edge of bringing that Biblical world view to head on engagement with the non-Biblical culture around us. It’s dangerous. We’ve got to be immersed, anchored to God’s Word to do that, because the culture is seductive. But I think we are called to do it if we are really going to invite people to Jesus Christ.