

Worldviews, Tolerance and the Bible

Acts 17:16-17

Introduction

How should we respond when we meet people with a different worldview or religion than our own? If you believe in the God of the Bible, how often do you talk about spiritual things with someone who is an Atheist or who embraces a different religion, perhaps at work or at school? Or maybe you consider yourself a spiritual person, but do not necessarily subscribe to one view of God. In what ways do you find it helpful to discuss spiritual matters with someone who *does* hold a particular belief system or religion? Whatever our background might be, it is important to think about these things, because all of us are part of an increasingly pluralistic world. In other words, we are surrounded by people from all different backgrounds.

Two approaches in interacting with other worldviews:

- (1) I interviewed a Japanese Shinto priest who said, “You monotheists believe in one God, so you have to consider everything else as evil and reject it. But we don’t believe in an ultimate evil, so we can accept all worldviews and all gods, because we are polytheists!” In other words, his own belief in a multiplicity of gods gives him flexibility to be able to accept all other gods and religions.
- (2) The late Dr. Ninian Smart was a professing Christian and a pioneer in the field of *secular religious studies*. He wrote that “it is obvious that as we move toward a world civilization, in which so many cultures and spiritual traditions will impinge on one another, all of us should *understand* one another.” He emphasized that no one should declare that his or her own worldview is correct by referring to some sort of absolute proof.

Even though these come from very different backgrounds, do these approaches sound similar? I think it is the normal view in our culture today. Both of these approaches seem to hold to a bottom-line that many of us today would call “tolerance.” This seems to have become a buzz word and an overarching ethic as people try to adapt to an increasingly pluralistic world. It advises us to avoid absolute truth claims that we may accept all worldviews, religions, sexual preferences, etc.

Today, I want to see what the Bible has to say about this issue of how to respond to diverse worldviews. And in fact, we may find that the idea of tolerance is closer to the biblical view than we think. But we will also see where the Bible both completes and corrects our culture’s version of “tolerance.”

Outline

Two points: When Paul sees the Athenian idols, he

- 1) Reacts with Distress and
- 2) Responds with Dialogue.

These two points are related to each other in kind of a chain-reaction beginning when Paul observes the idols in the city of Athens: First, Paul **reacts** with **distress**. I get this from verse 16 in the English Standard Version, “...his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.” And once the Apostle Paul experiences this emotional reaction, he then

responds with dialogue. This comes from verse 17, “So he reasoned...” Again, these will be our two key points in understanding this text:

Background of Acts and Athens

Let us begin with a brief look at the background of Acts and of the city of Athens. Acts is an amazing mission history. It tells the story of how God’s Kingdom began to spread throughout the world through the message and the Spirit of Jesus Christ. It begins as a little-known message passionately embraced by a small group of uneducated rural Jewish fishermen and the like. Then it overcomes linguistic, cultural, spiritual, geographical barriers on its way to being embraced by people the world over.

The church is not finished with its mission until all nations have had a chance to hear the gospel message of Jesus who died and rose again! And as Matthew 24:14 tells us, then “the end will come.” That is, Jesus will return and God will be worshipped by all as the true and eternal King. According to a non-denominational research group, the Joshua Project, there are still 6,829 cultures or “people groups” that have not yet been reached with the gospel. Japan is one of them. And this is one reason why we have a passion to keep ministering there, even amidst diverse challenges and what at times seems to be slow progress. This mission of God to take the gospel to all nations started as we see in Acts, and we are to continue the mission today as the universal church of Jesus Christ.

Our passage today teaches us an important part of this mission. We see the strategy of the first and greatest cross-cultural missionary, the Apostle Paul. But what we will focus on today is what this passage teaches us about his motivation and passion in the way he interacted with people of different worldviews.

Before Paul arrives in Athens by himself, as is described in our passage today, he and his two mission partners, Timothy and Silas had decided to split-up. This was probably because of the increased troubles and opposition they had encountered on their mission trip to take the gospel from the East to the West. (Before this trip the gospel may have been considered an Asian-only thing, but here it is first shown to be for Europeans as well.)

Now the idols that Paul saw there were of all different shapes and sizes. For example, the famous Parthenon was built in order to house a 9-11 meters (40-foot) high ivory and gold statue of the city goddess, Athena. One historian said that there were around 20,000 idols in Athens. And a Greek poet said that it was easier to find an idol than a man in that city.

So how does Paul react when he sees these idols?

(1) When faced with this Athenian idolatry, Paul REACTS WITH DISTRESS

First of all we need to understand the intense emotion involved in Paul’s reaction, and then we will see what it is that he is reacting against. In verse 16 we see a unique word that describes Paul’s emotional reaction to the idols. Depending on your translation, you may have the word *provoked*, *grieved*, *troubled*, *saddened*, or even *angered*. And to emphasize the depth and intensity of this emotion, some add the phrase *in his spirit* or *in his heart*. A more complete definition of the original meaning of this word is, “to be provoked or upset at someone or something involving severe emotional concern.” So we see that Paul’s reaction is *passionate*.

And what is it that causes this reaction in Paul? Of course it happens when he sees these idols. But, Paul immediately recognized such an abundance of images as a worship issue. Paul shows us his own view of what idolatry is in Romans 1:23. Here he says that those who

commit idolatry are actually exchanging “...**the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.**” So when Paul sees these statues and images that have been made to be worshipped, feared and prized by the Athenians, he sees it as a backward and false worship: The one true Creator of all things created all people to worship Him, yet people are worshipping something else instead. Even when people reject worshipping the true God, they cannot help but worship something. So instead of prizing, loving, fearing, and obeying God above all else, they make other things and worship those instead: Instead of true worship of the Creator, they embrace false worship: worship of created things.

So Paul is not reacting in opposition to the statues or the people who worship them. Paul was passionate *against* false worship, because he was passionate *for* true worship! This is the key message for us in observing that Paul reacts with distress. Paul’s interaction with other worldviews all begins with his passion for God. His distress and provocation over the idols is driven by this passion. And this distress and provocation then expresses itself in his response. That is, he responds with dialogue. That is our second point.

(2) When faced with Athenian idolatry, Paul RESPONDS WITH DIALOGUE.

Paul does not respond with war and violence like we have unfortunately seen time and again in the holy wars and crusades. That is not the true Christian response. But neither does Paul ignore the people and say, “There’s no hope for them. They are totally lost. Besides, I don’t want to cause any trouble in the town or get myself involved in a losing debate.” Unfortunately, many of us do these things when we come across people with other worldviews. For example, when the Jehovah’s Witnesses come knocking on your door, are you ever tempted to turn off the lights and hide in the back room? This is not the biblical response either.

The proper response is seen here in the Apostle Paul. The word *disputation* or *reasoning* in verse 17 implies that Paul is making his case and then leaving room for discussion. That is where I get the word “dialogue.” He was not lacking in passion: being deeply distressed and filled with emotion, he responds with restraint. He takes his message to every people group in the city: the Jews, the God-fearing Gentiles, and the Pagan Greeks (verse 17). And he does it in a peaceful and respectful way, as dialogue *is* peaceful and respectful.

We also may notice that he did it in a fitting way for each of these different groups: the Jews meet in the synagogue, so Paul joined their meeting in the synagogue. Then he goes down to the marketplace just as the great historical philosophers of Athens had famously done. While in the market place, he is not yelling at the people and telling them that they will go to hell. Neither is he silently living a good life before them. Instead, he is opening his mouth and speaking to them with the best words and in the best way that he can to persuade them.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to earth as a man that we might understand. If we are doing cross-cultural ministry or trying to lead someone to Christ, we must do it in a way that they can understand. For example, **1 Peter 3:1** tells wives that if they want to win their husbands to the Lord, then “thou shalt do so by tricking him to come to church and by constantly nagging.” No, wives should do it through their godly and submissive lifestyle more than through words. I believe that this is the kind of thing we can learn here from Paul’s responding with dialogue: No one can come to faith in Jesus without hearing the message of the cross, because “**faith comes through hearing...**” Romans 10:17. However, we must communicate that message with wisdom in the most effective way that we can. And we remember the source and motivation for all of our gospel dialogue is what... passion for God!

False worship BREAKS OUR HEARTS and OPENS OUR MOUTHS

So what can we learn from this? Our world is full of false worship, especially in those nations that still have not had a chance to hear the gospel. If we have a passion for God's worship, then a lost world full of false worship must cause our hearts to be broken and our mouths to be opened. When Paul saw the Athenian idols, he reacted with distress. Therefore, when we are faced with false worship and a lost world, we must have broken hearts as well. Next, Paul responded to the idols with dialogue. Therefore, we must respond to a lost world with an open mouth. That is, being ready to share Jesus with our words in the best way that we know how.

We saw that this all began in Paul with a passion for God's glory. Therefore, this should be the biblical motivation for the mission of the church. It is important to have a broken-heart for those who will be judged and condemned for their sins, but this should *not* be our primary motivation for mission and evangelism. More than anything else, we should be filled with passion for God's glory. As the Apostle Paul is here, we should be deeply pained and even angered that God is not being worshipped. As Pastor John Piper put it, God's worship is the fuel and the goal of mission. Because, "mission is not the most important thing, worship is!" (*Let the Nations Be Glad*)

If a passion for God is our motivation, we will keep our eyes fixed on God no matter what happens and everything will fall into place. We will not forget why we are doing it. We will trust that God is at work, and not rely on ourselves. As we look to God, He will be part of everything we do and people will see Him in us. Our lives will reflect the fact that God is our passion, and our life will reflect the goodness of the message we preach when our mouths *are* opened. In Japan we have seen God do great things among us. If our focus is not on Him, we may soon try to take the credit for what He's doing and this will probably put a damper on the whole thing.

On the other hand, if our primary motivation is the lost world, then we will focus on people instead of God. We will care more about numbers and visible fruit than about God's working and moving in our midst. I remember one young Japanese lady a few years ago who prayed with tears to give her life to Jesus. She began growing in faith and was even sharing Jesus with her non-Christian family. But after a few months, she quit coming to church and would not respond to any phone calls or other contact from anyone at church. We never saw her again. Any veteran minister in Japan will have a list of people who have done this sort of thing. And if our first motivation for mission is a broken-heart for the lost, then we will feel like we have lost major battles when these kinds of things happen. This will lead to discouragement and burn out. Our first motivation and power for mission needs to be a passion for God's glory.

Tolerance

So this brings us back to our question about this issue of "tolerance." How could it be appropriate to answer other worldviews and religions with such an emotional and exclusive response? In fact, many people our day might even consider the Apostle Paul to be a bigot because of his reaction to other religions.

One reason is because included in this idea of tolerance is a desire to accept all people. And this is a commendable thing. The God of the Bible is indeed a God who longs to accept

all people, no matter what their race, culture, background, worldview, or sexual preference. And so on this point of accepting all people, the Bible is in agreement with our culture.

But let me show you where tolerance comes short of the way God calls us to interact with other worldviews. One picture that is often used to express this idea of tolerance goes something like this, “All paths lead to the top of the same mountain. Therefore, whatever works for you is fine with me.” In this case, the paths are all the different religions or spiritualities, and the top of the mountain is the goal, which may refer to heaven, enlightenment, God, etc. This analogy is trying to convey the idea that all religions are the same in the end, so people can believe whatever they want. In this way, it tries to accept all religions.

But do you see the contradiction here? You cannot say that all religions are like paths that lead to the top of the same mountain unless you yourself are at the top of the mountain and are able to see clearly enough to *look down* at all the paths! In other words, people who make the absolute truth claim that “all religions are the same in the end,” are insisting that they are the only ones who can see all truth clearly. They *say* that they accept all religions, but in this way they are actually rejecting all of those religions and worldviews that would claim to be exclusively true. And what they are really assuming is that their own view is the only one which is actually grounded in the whole of reality. They are the ones with the corner on truth.

So if we are honest, all of us are being exclusive. We all believe that our view is the best and anyone who would disagree with us is wrong. That is why we believe that way! So instead of blowing people off and saying, “whatever works for you pal,” we need to learn to honestly disagree. Then we can engage in dialogue to find out which worldview leads us to humility, love, compassion, acceptance of those who are different than us, etc? And I think it is Christianity, because it was founded by a sinless man who died even for His enemies: Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

So here is where all of this takes us: If we are truly passionate about God and His worship, we will not simply ignore the false worship in our pluralistic world. Whether they are idols of stone, wood, money, sex, power, the American dream, or anything else that people might put above God, these idols should cause distress in our spirits. And with our hearts broken because of our passion for God, we then take gospel-oriented actions and words to spread God’s Kingdom all over this earth.

Here’s the problem: I don’t think we can do it - not by our own power. Is it not true that we ourselves struggle with idolatry? A famous Christian once said, “the human heart is an idol factory.” I know it is true in my own life. We are so focused on ourselves, our own families, our possessions, our careers. Even our Christian ministries often deny the lost nations as we focus only on our own cities and our own countries! We may believe in Jesus, but we quickly forget Him several times throughout each day. I love the old hymn with the lyrics, *Thou my best thought by day or by night*. But how often do our thoughts drift away from God? How many of our prayers and finances go out to the mission field when we hear that millions are dying without ever hearing about Jesus Christ? I just met a family from Orissa, India where radical Hindus celebrate their festivals by destroying Christian homes and villages and burning people alive. God wants us to have so much passion for His worship and be so filled with Him that we will love those people in India enough to give our lives for them. And I’m not just talking about the Christians, but the Hindu radicals who are persecuting them

too. But are we really able to die for our enemies? Are we really passionate enough for God to do all that we can? I cannot say that I am. And this is unacceptable before a holy God.

That is why we have to cling to the One who *did* have perfect passion for God and perfect love for the lost. In fact, He gave His life for His enemies and for idolaters, like us. Let me share with you a wonderful passage that shows Jesus' perfect passion for God and His perfect deeds of love for the lost world. This is a picture of all the elders and beings gathered around God's throne in Heaven, and they are singing a song of worship to Jesus. Revelation 5:9-10. "And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.'" Here we see that Jesus did not just give His life and spill His blood for His own Jewish race alone. He did it for every tribe and every nation and every tongue! And we see that He did it ultimately "for God," and his kingdom.

Jesus was perfectly obedient and full of passion for God's worship in every action and in every thought His entire life. And the climax is what is being sung about here where He made the greatest sacrifice for His Father and for the lost world. Because of what He did, His blood cleanses each of us if we will only believe in Him. And we must continue to take our weaknesses and inabilities to Him with renewed faith again and again. As we do so, the Holy Spirit fills our hearts with God's love (as it says in Romans 5:1), so that Jesus' passion for God and love for the lost becomes ours.

Finally, let me share a story with you about a Christian janitor living in Islamabad, Pakistan. I took this from CNN.com about an incident that happened last October:

"The recently hired janitor's name was Pervaiz Masih. According to eyewitness accounts, the attacker approached disguised in women's clothing. He shot the guard on duty, and then approached the cafeteria, which was packed with hundreds of female students. Masih intercepted the bomber in the doorway, however, and the bomber self-detonated right outside the crowded hall, spraying many of his explosive vest's arsenal of ball bearings out into the parking lot instead of into the cafeteria... 'Between 300 to 400 girls were sitting in there,' said Professor Fateh Muhammad Malik, the rector of the university... Pervez masih rose above the barriers of caste, creed and sectarian terrorism. Despite being a Christian he sacrificed his life to save the Muslim girls.'... Masih was a member of Pakistan's Christian minority, traditionally one of the poorest communities in the country."

This man lived in a pluralistic world just like we do. So what would move a man to give his life for a society that looked down on him, and for people that are from a different religion than he is? This goes beyond "tolerance" and "acceptance," into the realm of true sacrificial love. As his sacrifice is a picture of Christ, I believe that it was his own faith in Christ that allowed him to give his life in this way for God's glory and as a witness to thousands of Muslims. May our faith in Christ fill us with more and more passion for God's Kingdom and God's worship that we too may love and open our mouths for the sake of the lost.

Prayer: Jesus, forgive us for our lack of passion for God and for our lack of action for those who are different from ourselves and for those who do not know you around the world. Now please help us to be filled with Your passion for God and send us out to this lost world enabling us to give our entire lives as You have. Amen.