

Sermon—January 30-31, 1999  
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Christ Confronts the Culture Series  
Acts 17:16ff

### Christ Confronts Postmodernism

I have been doing a series that I have called “Christ Confronts the Culture.” And in the course of this series, I am taking some of the primary issues that characterize American culture’s mindset, our thought processes. I want you to understand how people think, how they reason, why we Americans do what we do. I would like it to have some language, some hooks, so that when you encounter certain viewpoints, certain thought processes, you can say, “Ah, I now have some language. I can now fit this into a framework of understanding why my Professor is saying what she is saying. Why my friends at school with whom I am talking to about Jesus just came out with a statement, ‘That’s true for you. That may be your God, but it is not necessarily my God’.” Why when you make a moral statement about abortion or homosexuality or pre-marital sex you may be accused of being intolerant. Why the media speaks in sound bites instead of long, reasoned discussions of issues. Why polls are cited all the time as the controlling issue in national debates about the Clinton Impeachment. Or the rightness or wrongness of the OJ Simpson verdict. Why people are so depressed even while the economy is picking up. Why millions of Americans are still abusing drugs and alcohol and sex and food and cyberspace. Why so many people are reaching for an escape.

Listen, friends, part of the reason why I am doing this series on Christ Confronts Culture is that I want you to be able to interpret what you are seeing, to understand it. All these diverse things – you see some weird architecture and say, “Where is that coming from?” Or you see some bizarre commercial on TV where the person is just screaming at you, flashing an image. Or another talking head, another expert citing another poll on another political show. Are there any common threads here? Is there an underlying worldview, an underlying philosophy that takes these different colored tiles of our culture and puts them in a mosaic and says, “OK, I am beginning to see a picture.”

I am doing this series not only so that you can interpret and understand the world that you are living in, but that you might know how to respond to the culture. Last week I did a message called Christ Confronts Evolution. I talked about the whole evolution versus creation debate. In future weeks we are going to talk about feminism, the sexual revolution, materialism, Y2K – the millenium bug, the New Age movement. Today I want to talk about Christ Confronts Postmodernism.

Now, trying to get a handle on postmodernism one author wrote is like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall. It has such an amorphous, ameba-like shape to it that it is constantly popping loose of any set of definitions. Well, let me give you some of the features of postmodernism because you are going to hear that term thrown around a lot. Certainly, if you are in school you are going to hear the term postmodernism. If you are in the arts, in theater, in graphic arts, in fine arts, architecture, music, dance, in performing arts – if you are interested in politics, history, literature,

science – if you are trying to make sense of the world as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, you must begin to get a handle on postmodernism. What is postmodernism?

Well, the word “post” means after. Postmodernism means after modernism. The easiest way to define the time span of modernism is to say that modernism covers the precise 200-year time span between 1789 and 1989. You say, “Why pick 1789 as the beginning of modernism and 1989 as the precise moment when modernism fell and we entered postmodernity, postmodernism. Why those two points in history?”

Well, those two points in history speak to us of two walls that fell. In 1789 there was the storming of the wall of the Bastille Prison in France and the beginning of the French Revolution with its ideals of equality and reason and human progress and optimism. And 1989 was the terminal point, the end of this process, of the triumph of human reason and human engineering and the pursuit of human equality. 1989 marked the fall of Communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Two walls that stand like bookends to modernism. The wall of Bastille Prison stormed by French peasants bringing in the French Revolution and the Berlin Wall which was smashed by Berliners in 1989 signifying the end of Communism.

Those 200 years of modernism were characterized by massive overconfidence in the power of human reason to solve everything. We human beings, with our science and our technology, we can solve everything. We can fix all of the world’s problems. If we tinker enough we can solve all of our ethnic conflicts, all of our economic conflicts. We can solve the problem of poverty. We can solve the problem of racism. We can create one gigantic brotherhood of man. Modernism was this gigantic

attempt by man to understand and then to master the world by putting reason in the driver's seat and science at the helm. Modernism believed in an inevitable progress. Everything must get better and better. It always spoke in favor of new – new frontiers, new deals, a new day dawning. Everything is bigger and better and we are all smarter and happier and kinder than we ever were before. And if we could all just agree on these universal truths that reason would discover, and if we just put people in school and give them more and more education then we will all be enlightened. And with just a little more social engineering we will transcend racial differences, ethnic differences, gender differences, class differences, and lifestyle differences. We will all be able to agree. And religion will just wither away as will irrational attachments to country and place and ethnicity.

I am going to plunge right in to talk about postmodernism now that we know we understand what modernism is. I would like you to open up your bibles. We are going to talk about postmodernism working off of Acts 17:16 where we read, “While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” Here is the great apostle Paul in Athens, the center of the glory of ancient Greece. Athens, with its rich, philosophical tradition – Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Athens, with its literature and architecture and art. It was unrivaled in the ancient world as an intellectual center, perhaps like Cambridge, Massachusetts, the home of Harvard, or New Hampshire, home of Yale, or Columbus, Ohio, home of the Buckeyes.

Here the apostle Paul arrives in Athens by ship from northern Greece and his Christian friends leave him there alone. What does he see? He sees a city full of

idols, innumerable temples and shrines and statues and altars. In the Parthenon there is this huge gold and ivory statue of Athena. There were images of the gods Apollo and Jupiter, Venus, Mercury and Neptune and Diana made out of gold, silver, ivory and marble and fashioned by the greatest of Greek sculptors. When Paul went to Athens he saw a city full of idols.

What do you see in America right now as we enter the new Millenium? What do you see? Perhaps for you it is a confusing hodge-podge of a opinion polls and MTV and Republicans and liberal Democrats and feminists and lesbians and conservatives battling for their share of attention and battling for their share of power, their share of the government pie. What do you see?

What I see is a thread, a consistent thread, running through our culture that tells us that we are at the end of an era and that we are beginning a new era. The 200-year reign of modernism is over, with its optimism and confidence in human reason and its search for overriding universal truths, and its belief that we can create one new society by science and human social engineering. I see an end to an era and the beginning of another era, the postmodern era.

Do you know what postmodernism is? Before postmodernism is a movement, it is a mood – a mood of discouragement, a mood of despair, a mood of pessimism and cynicism. Postmoderns look at the confidence and the optimism of the modernists, the view that everything is getting better and better and that we human beings can, by the use of reason, triumph over the irrational passions of hate and war and racism, and the Postmoderns say, “Sorry, but we don’t believe it anymore. We have lost our confidence in human reason. We have seen what reason produces. And the

most reasonable nation in the world where most of the Nobel Prize winners came in the first 40 years of this Century, Germany, we see what reason produces. It produces death camps. We see what this attempt to create a classless society of equality produces. It produces gulags in the Soviet Union and mass starvation in China. We no longer believe in inevitable progress and reason and overarching truths." Before postmodernism is a movement, it is a mood. It is a mood of cynicism, of skepticism, of pessimism. Survey after survey of young adults indicated they are far more cynical and pessimistic than their parents or their grandparents were at their age.

We human beings have been humbled by the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. We came into this Century with big hopes, big plans, big dreams. But we have been through two World Wars and a Cold War and the build up of weapons of mass destruction and so we end this Century and the Millenium sickened, discouraged, cynical. Over against modernism's attempt to unify the human race, over class distinctions, race distinctions and ethnic distinctions, postmoderns celebrate their distinctiveness. So we are seeing a world that is becoming increasingly fragmented. The issue now is not "what do you think?" but "who are you? Where are you coming from?" That is how you are defined. Are you a white heterosexual middle class American male? Are you an African-American lesbian feminist woman?

Postmodernism is characterized by pessimism. It is characterized by fragmentation. We are no longer Americans. There has to be some kind of hyphenation before you are described. You are a German-American, an Asian American, a Latino-American, you are straight, bisexual, gay, transgender. Have you

tried to follow the conflict in the Balkans? You need numbers on the backs of the players to follow it. You have Ethnic-Albanians, the Greek-Orthodox Serbs, the Muslim-Bosnians, the Catholic-Croats.

Here is a third feature of postmodernism. The loss of confidence in objective truth. There is no objective truth, just truths – your perspective of the truths. And your perspective of the truth is based on what particular group you come from. So we no longer evaluate the reasonableness of your argument. We no longer evaluate the truth claims that you are making. Postmoderns are simply interested in who is making the statement - a conservative Christian Republican, a Southern Democrat, an animal-rights activist. There is a claim by postmodernists that there is no objective overriding truth that is valid for all people, in all times and at all places. There are just multiple perspectives, multiple viewpoints depending on where you sit in the world.

Have you seen this in media coverage of the big events of our day? We don't care what the Pope says and whether what he says is consistent with Catholic tradition or consistent with what the Bible intends or true or even good or helpful. When the media covers a statement of the Pope, it doesn't evaluate the truth claim comparing it to some objective standard. The Pope is simply announcing a view and we must immediately get eleven other viewpoints – the viewpoints of Kathleen O'Hara, and Irish-American woman living in Boston and how she feels about contraception. And Tony Mancini, an Italian-American fisherman living in San Francisco and how he feels about the ordination of women. And all these viewpoints are equally valid.

Similarly, the media doesn't ask the question: did OJ Simpson really murder his wife? How do we evaluate the evidence? We simply interview African-Americans and Caucasian-Americans and show that it is all just a matter of perspective.

And this view that there is no controlling truth or perspective has bled into world politics. It is now illegitimate for the US to critique China on its human rights policy and its human rights abuses. The Chinese respond that it is cultural Imperialism. You can't judge us for our treatment of individuals or our torture, or our crushing of individual rights or religious freedoms because those are all Western traditions. And here in China, we value other things. That was the argument recently when President Clinton visited China, and that perspective really won the day.

And in this climate of multiple perspectives, since there is no objective truth, no standard to which we can appeal, no outside source of information or revelation, polls are making the rules. Have you noticed that virtually every single story covering political events of our day are dominated by what the latest poll says? Why is that? Because postmoderns have lost their confidence in objective truth or even our capacity to get the truth. So the only thing that matters is what the mass of multiple perspectives can agree upon.

This loss of objective truth has even spilled over into the sciences. More and more academics are questioning whether you can do pure science, or is science, itself, simply a matter of perspective. There is book out by a physics professor at NY University named Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, a physics professor in Belgium. The book, in the US is titled, "Fashionable Nonsense." These two physics professors



have taken real examples from scholarly journals, in which postmodernists critique science from this multi-perspective absence of objective truth viewpoint. Here is a real example from their book.

This woman wrote, “Is  $E=mc^2$  a male chauvinist equation?” Perhaps it is. Let us make the hypothesis that it is in so far as it privileges the speed of light over all factors that are vitally necessary to us. What seems to me to indicate the possibility of the male chauvinist nature of the equation is not directly its use in creating nuclear weapons, rather it is the male perspective of privileging what goes fastest. In other words because men like speed, they like to drive fast, they have come up with this equation.  $E=mc^2$ .”

These physics professors respond whatever one might think of “other factors that are vitally necessary to us” the fact remains that the relationship  $E=mc^2$  between energy and mass is experimentally verified to a high degree of precision and it would not be valid if the speed of light were replaced by something else.

This Alan Sokal has been so incensed with the attack on science by what he calls nonsense science that he recently submitted an article entitled “Transgressing the Boundaries Toward a Transformative Hermeneutic of Quantum Gravity” to this scholarly journal that is dominated by postmodernist scholars. In this article Alan Sokal endeavored to write pure nonsense. He wrote page after page in which he deliberately tried to not write one intelligible true thought. He filled the article with buzzwords, and appeal to authority rather than to logic and reason, with nonsequiturs, things that don’t follow, conclusions that don’t follow from the premise. He appealed to emotion, prejudice, and class distinctions. As he predicted,

the article was not only accepted for publication, but praised by its editorial board. Having lost a view of objective truth, these postmodern academics couldn't even distinguish between sense and nonsense, between inane babbling and the capacity to say something, between real scholarship and stupidity. And they apparently weren't bothered by Professor Sokal's little ruse. When truth appears, so does the capacity to be offended.

Last point in trying to get some sense of what postmodernism is like – postmodernism is the triumph of image over ideas. We live in a culture right now that is dominated by television and video. More and more, people don't evaluate things based on true, false, good, bad – those are words about ideas and language. The medium of television causes people to evaluate things based on how they feel. Because of television and video, many of us have lost our capacity to follow a reasoned argument, to listen to a debate that moves from one point to another point. Such reasoned discourse is considered boring. It is not visually interesting. Messages, therefore, must be communicated in sound bites with video clips and ideas take a backseat to image. Just open up a cutting edge fashion magazine or a magazine devoted to the arts or to dance or to rock music and you will quickly see what I mean when I say postmodernism is characterized by image over ideas.

Now what do you feel when you hear about postmodernism? What do you feel?

It is interesting that the Bible recalls what Paul felt when he encountered the idols in Athens. In v. 16 we read, "While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols."

Now, there are a number of feelings that the apostle Paul could have had as he walked around Athens. He could have been just intimidated by the intellectual power of Athens. He could have said, “These people are so brilliant, they have gone to all these philosophical schools and they speak in this abstract, learned philosophical language. Look at them debating these various philosophical schools. They are so smart. They are so brilliant – who am I?” He could have been intimidated by the intellectual climate of Athens.

He could have been awed. He could have been in awe of the architecture, the art, the sculptures, the beauty, the grandeur and just walked around with his mouth open.

He could have been depressed. This place is hopeless. Look at what is going on. All these idol worshippers, there is no one here who knows God. I am all by myself day after day. I don’t have any friends here. I don’t have any fellowship. I am all by myself. I don’t have any supporters. He could have been depressed.

But it says that he was greatly distressed. While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed. Literally, he was greatly irritated. He was provoked. He withstood to jealous anger.

What do you feel when you hear about the features of postmodernism? What do you feel when you walk around OSU or watch TV or read the newspaper or get into a discussion at work or talk with your parents or siblings and they tell you, “that Jesus stuff is true for you, but it is not true for me.” When you hear that those Christians are trying again to shove their morality on all the rest of us – they are trying legislate morality. When you encounter pessimism or cynicism of the young

or you see this incredible fragmentation of the culture so that every group is warring for their piece of the pie and even families are breaking up so that the smallest unit of society is broken on the rocks of postmodernism. What do you feel?

What do you feel when you hear someone talk about “what is a family anyway? We can redefine marriage. It is not necessarily two opposite gendered people making a vow and a commitment in a public sphere. Marriage is rather a covenant of caring and sharing between any two people. For right now, it’s what they have in their heart. It doesn’t have to be publicly recognized. There doesn’t have to be this exchange of forever vows. They don’t have to be opposite sex partners.” What do you feel as you look at the culture?

Many people feel intimidated. They say, “Wow, I don’t have the answers. I don’t know how I begin to combat this kind of thinking, and it is backed up with all this clever, slippery use of language – the language of tolerance, the language of fairness and justice.” Many people feel intimidated.

Some people just feel depressed. Ah, what’s the point of even trying to fight? It is like trying to fight a tidal wave. What is the point of trying to engage and confront? The tide is so strong. About the best I could hope for is to build a little wall around me and my children and try to protect the few of us that we can gather in that little life boat. Some people feel depressed.

Some are awed, dumbstruck by the images, by the packaging.

It says, “The apostle Paul was greatly distressed.” He was provoked. He had a jealous anger rise up within him.

Let me talk about our feelings regarding the culture and this mood, not just a movement, but a mood called postmodernism. There are lots of reasons to share our faith in Jesus, and our belief in it is absolute Lordship and truth over every perspective and power group viewpoint, to wrestle with the idols in our day. Idols that deny the reality of truth. Idols that announce that it is all just a matter of perspective. Idols which further fragment the culture into competing power groups. Idols which exalt image over substance. There are lots of reasons to wrestle with the idols of our day.

One reason is love. Because God fills your heart with love for another person. You have gotten close enough to another person, maybe a person in your family – a sister or a brother, a parent, a cousin, or an in-law – you have gotten close enough to someone at school, someone at work, someone you have met through one of our ministries maybe, to the inner city or through our AIDS ministry. There are lots of reasons to combat idols. One of the main reasons the Bible talks about is love. Because your heart is stirred in love for a person and you really hate to see what this idol of postmodernism is doing in their life. You see the idol of image over reality and it is destroying the person. You see the idol of cynicism and hardness and pessimism and your heart is moved by love to pull that person into the safe shores of the truth.

Paul says, “The love of Christ compels” him. Certainly, his love for Christ compels him, but also Christ’s love through him towards others.

What kind of feeling should you ask for from God when encountering this culture? You should ask for the feeling of love.

But a second feeling that you should ask for is the feeling that we see here in this text, great distress. Not depression or intimidation, but provocation, what I call jealous-upset. It is something that God works in the soul – jealous-upset. Jealous provocation. Paul saw all of these idols that people were bowing in front of in the city of Athens. All of these idols that people were praying to and making offerings to and it irritated him that there were rivals of stone and marble; that there were rivals put up that were capturing people's affections instead of Almighty God.

Now listen, the Bible talks about two kinds of jealousy. There is a sinful jealousy that the Bible calls one of the works of the flesh. Sinful jealousy is when you are jealous about someone else's looks, or position, or popularity, or intelligence or abilities. The reason that is sinful is because you have no exclusive claim or right, no monopoly on the right to be popular. You have no exclusive claim on beauty as if you should have all the beauty in the world. Or on intelligence as if you should have all the intelligence in the world. Or attention or position. When you are jealous of someone else because of position or beauty or intelligence or popularity, or ministry you are saying, "I have a claim on those things and I am mad that anyone else competes with me for this." That is called the work of the flesh.

But when you have an exclusive claim, when you rightfully deserve a monopoly on something and your monopoly is being challenged, then your feeling is righteous jealousy. A spouse deserves the exclusive affection of their married partner. And if their partner engages in an emotional affair, where they are drawn to and fantasize about and are emotionally connected to someone other than their spouse, there is a

right to jealousy. Or if their spouse engages in a physical affair, there is righteous jealousy.

And when God's claims to be the exclusive Lord is challenged, when his monopoly over our worship and our devotion and our obedience is challenged, then the appropriate feeling that should be provoked not only in the heart of God, but in the heart of those who love God is jealousy, irritation, upset. We can't just let this happen. We have to do something because this particular thing challenges the glory of God.

Now, I must quickly say that there is a difference between being distressed at idols and being distressed at people. People are to be loved, people are to be respected. People are to be treated with dignity. Paul challenged the idols, the philosophers and ideas of his day.

What do you feel as you look out at our culture? Paul felt love. Paul felt righteous jealousy.

Let me suggest one other feeling you ought to have. Hope. The end of an era is a most hopeful time for the spread of Christianity and the absolute truth found in Christ because the old gods that used to be worshipped have been shown to be powerless. The old gods have been thrown off their thrones. And the end of an era and the beginning of a possible new era is a time where people are looking for answers. They are dissatisfied with the old answers and they are groping and searching for new answers.

That is what was going on in Athens. While there were all these idols around, people really didn't believe in the gods. They gave them a passing nod, but they had

lost their confidence in Apollos, Zeus, Venus and Athena. They had even lost their confidence in their philosophies. It was a good time to preach Christianity.

And today is a good time to share Christianity because the idol of human self-confidence and reason, of our ability to manage and conquer everything, to solve every problem, to end war and suffering and class distinction and racism, the God of modernism has been thrown down.

Now, what is going to replace it? Pessimism? Multiple perspectives? Or Jesus? That depends on what Christians do.

What did Paul do? V. 17, "So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks as well as in the market place day by day with those who happened to be there."

What did Paul do?

Well, what he didn't do was to start cursing at the Athenians. He didn't put a fundraising letter out that said the Athenians were taking over. He didn't throw up his hands in despair. It says, "He reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks as well as in the marketplace day by day." He went to those who knew God and talked with them, but then he took it out into the marketplace.

It is important that we share here in the confines of the church, that we learn more and more about the truth, that we get a clear understanding of the issues and what it is that we are dealing with, but then we need to take it to the marketplace. What is the marketplace? It is not necessarily Kroger's or Big Bear. It is any place where we meet people who are talking or who are engaged in conversation. It could be the Student Union at OSU. It could be the lunchroom in your high school. Or the



lunch table at work. It could be the park where mothers gather to watch their kids. Or the stands where you sit to watch your child play basketball or practice, or a bowling alley. Or a neighborhood coffee. Or the dinner table, or a café or a restaurant.

The marketplace is any place where people sit around talking. Swapping ideas. Sharing their stories. It certainly includes the media and the letters page in the newspaper and magazine. Journalism, the arts, classrooms, offices. And I love the fact that Paul went out day by day to talk with people.

Listen. Believing in Jesus is a process that people undergo where we first need to understand what the message is, what is it that is being communicated here. We need to start thinking about how does that fit with the ideas that I already have? We need to have our misimpressions about Christianity cleared up.

No, God is not like that, he is like this.

No, the message isn't that, it is this.

No, Christianity is not primarily about being religious, it's about a relationship with a wonderful person named Jesus.

We Christians need to give people time to engage in the process. Not everyone is in the same place. Not everyone has the same foundation. Now some people are right on the edge and need to be called to decision. They have engaged in the process long enough. There is a time to make a decision, a time to decide, what are you going to do with Jesus? Some of you are at that place today.

I like the fact that it says that Paul reasoned. He reasoned in the Synagogue and in the marketplace. Now reasoning, discussing, debating, dialoguing, arguing, is not

the only way a person can be opened up to the truth found in Jesus Christ. But it certainly is a significant way.

Listen, while I believe that it is necessary in a postmodern culture to reason for the Christian faith, I don't think it is enough to reason. If the only thing the church does is reason with people, I think it is like having one of our hands tied behind our backs. People are looking for more than reason today. At a time of broken families, where kids grew up having the clear message that they were not number one in mom and dad's lives. Mom and dad were busy working. Mom and dad were busy with their own relationships, with new marriages and new jobs and moves. At a time when many people have grown up in fractured fragmented families, the church needs to reach people with love. And the practice of Christian community, inviting people into an experience of family. There needs to be enough community in the church, not just big classrooms in Sunday Schools, but groupings of people that are so loving, so helpful to each other, so supportive that a postmodern person comes in and doesn't only get reasoned with, but gets loved into the kingdom of God.

We have had dozens and dozens of people who have said, "I have been so helped, treated so warmly, spoken to with so much affection, given practical assistance, that I just want to find out more about what your God is all about." That's why we continually say to you join one of our small groups.

And I would add to this the need for the power of the Holy Spirit. Folks today are looking for an experience. They are looking for change. They want to know that God is real. That he is not just an ideal. That Christianity is not just a better idea.

That there is a power there, a power to break addictions, a power to heal, a sense of reality, “Yes, I found something when I have prayed.”

You know, I am so hopeful because churches like ours are absolutely at the cutting edge of receiving folks from this culture as the gods are falling because we are hitting from all sides – with reason, with love, with power.

And what did he encounter? Vv. 18-21, “A group of Epicurean and stoic philosophers began to dispute with him and some of them asked, ‘What is this babbler 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. 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? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears and we want 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.”

Now it is interesting that about both of these groups it was said in v. 21, that they spent all their time talking and listening to the latest ideas. Like postmoderns who have rejected a belief in absolute truth and rejected belief in a personal absolute God, these people didn’t believe in nothing, they believed in everything. They were constantly open to any new crackpot idea.

Listen, one of the major characteristics of postmodernism is the exaltation of tolerance and open-mindedness a place of supreme virtue. It is felt by many postmoderns that what has gotten us into trouble all these years is the claim by some people that they have the truth. These people who claim to have the truth hunt

down and persecute others that they think are in error. And the only way to stop the continual battling and warfare and wrestling matches is to simply acknowledge that none of us has the truth. Postmoderns believe that at the root of all the world's problems is the claim by some power group to have the monopoly on truth and if people would just give that up and be tolerant of a diversity of ideas and opinions, the world would be a better place.

How do Christians respond to this? Understand, friends, that we Christians living in this postmodern age are not the first to contend with the idea that the real problem is absolute truth, that we need to respect a pluralism of gods and ideas. The early Christians also had to contend with that. They called Paul a babblers, literally a junk man trading junk and a person who attacked their gods. These learnt and open-minded people were open to anything so long as it wasn't Christianity with its claim to be absolute truth.

So what is the response?

Let me suggest two things. Number one; there is a difference between tolerating people who hold weird ideas and tolerating weird ideas themselves. We Christians are called upon to love, to treat with respect and dignity every person no matter how weird their ideas. But we are not called upon to love and respect every weird idea in itself. So it is totally inappropriate and totally unchristian to show disrespect to another person, to label them with some derogatory label, to stand on the side of Gay Rights parades and shout curses at the men and women who are marching. We are called to love and respect people. But that doesn't mean we have to tolerate and embrace every single idea.

And this claim that the only way to stop all the fighting is to claim not to have the truth at all, that the problem is all these people who claim to have the truth, you will notice that people who make this claim are, in fact, among the least tolerant of anyone in society. I have noticed, and I am sure you have noticed this as well, that the preachers of tolerance are often the most shrill, most angry, most mean-spirited, most narrow and practice the highest degree of coercion and philosophical terrorism of anyone. You have never seen coercion or intolerance until you have been inside of a classroom at OSU or at one of our major universities and heard someone put as an absolute truth moral relativism or cultural relativism. If you want to talk about coercion step inside of a classroom in one of our public schools and very often you will find that tolerance is simply a cover to silence or legitimate debate.

When I went to law school I had the opportunity to sit under a lesbian feminist professor who viewed any disagreement with her perspective to be the mark of Neanderthal, bigoted, ignorant, straight-laced, prudish, puritanical, intolerant, thinking.

Last year here in the city of Columbus, the Columbus School Board passed an anti-harassment policy in which they said, among other things, that hate speech against people with different sexual orientations would not be tolerated in the Columbus public schools by students, by faculty, or any administrative staff and that if hate speech was engaged in regarding sexual orientation, a person would be subject to discipline and, perhaps, to expulsion. After a public meeting, I went and spoke with the president of the Columbus School Board and had a private

conversation with her in which I asked the following question: would your policy cover non-derogatory, non-labeling speech in which a student simply raised a question regarding the morality of homosexual behavior? If a student in a debate took the position that homosexual sex was immoral, would that be considered hate speech under your new policy?

She said, “Absolutely, it would be. That kind of talk has no place in public schools, in my opinion. There is no room for that. We ought not to be calling into question the morality of someone’s sexual orientation or sexual practices.”

Well, what did Paul say? He talked with them about God. It says in v. 22, “Then Paul stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I see that in every way you are a very religious. For as I walked around and observed 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.”

He makes a point of contact. He uses something from their culture to preach to them about the true God. In today’s language, instead of saying “I see that you are very religious,” we might say, “I see that you are interested in spiritual things. I see you reading *The Celestine Prophecy* or *Conversations with God*. So you really enjoyed the movie *Contact*, or *City of Angels*, or *What Dreams May Come*. I see you like the TV show, *Touched by an Angel*, or the *X-Files* – or you are interested in spiritual things.”

Then what Paul says is, “Let me talk with you about true spirituality. The God that you worship is unknown. Let me make that God known to you.” And though I don’t have the time to get into it, Paul challenges their image of God. He tells them:

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. And he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, at that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

Paul challenges their image of God. And I think that in clear communication today as we are attempting to share our Christian faith in a postmodern culture, we must challenge people's image of God. God is not a bigot we would say. God is not intolerant. God is not looking for the opportunity to slam people down. God is a seeking father. We might share again in updated language the story of the prodigal son and the father who runs out to embrace his son. We might share in updated language the kind of relationship that God wants as he adopts people into his family. We might share in updated language God's heart for the world – his genuine concern and care or the nearness of God to the broken-hearted. We might share in updated language, God's suffering, and the pain that God felt when he took on flesh and was hung on a cross.

Paul challenges their image of God. Paul challenges their image of themselves saying, "We are offspring" not that we are all children of God, adopted into his family, but that we are all objects of God's concern and love without random chance.

Paul calls people to account and to whole-life conversions in v. 30, “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.”

This is a universal message for all people everywhere. There is one God over all, calling us to account and not just to this little decision, repentance, but whole-life change.

How did people respond? It says, “When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, ‘We want to hear you again on this subject.’ At that Paul left the counsel. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, and also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.”

Let me finish with a little story.

A traveler came to a signpost, weary and perplexed. Around him radiating in all directions were innumerable paths. There was a fog on the hillside thick and impenetrable. And the signpost had become so weather and beaten that it was illegible.

“Which way should I go,” he asked? “I want to find the way to the fountain of truth, but there are so many paths, which is the right one?”

As he pondered the problem, three other travelers came up behind him journeying on the same road by which he had just arrived.

“Excuse me,” he said to the first, “Can you tell me the way to the fountain of truth?”



“Hmmp,” grunted the first man scornfully, “You don’t still believe in all that rubbish, do you? These roads all lead to nowhere. All that talk about a fountain of truth is so much claptrap. If you take my advice, you will pitch your tent right here by the sign post and make the best of what you got.”

The traveler’s face fell at the skeptic’s words, but brightened at the sight of a second man coming up the road behind him.

“Excuse me,” he said, “Can you tell me the way to the fountain of truth?”

The second man shrugged his shoulders, “Ahhh, who can say? Myself, I am just agnostic on the question. Maybe it is this way, maybe it is that way. You can’t possibly prove what is right and what is wrong, you know. The important thing is to be open minded, feeling free to choose whichever path you want and not judging others who choose a different path, old man. I wouldn’t dream of trying to influence your decision on the matter.”

The traveler thanked the agnostic for his advice, though he had hoped for more. Perhaps the third man would be more helpful.

“Excuse me, can you tell me the way to the fountain of truth?”

This time the fellow smiled in reply, “It is an unnecessary question my friend. All roads lead there. They only appear to go in different directions, you see. Out there they all circle back on one another and converge of the fountain of truth. Follow whatever direction you want and you will get there in the end.”

The traveler frowned, unconvinced. His battered old map indicated the presence of cliffs in the area down which he could fall if he took the wrong path. But which is the right one? He sighed in frustration and bewilderment. Suddenly, out of the mist

a fourth figure appeared. Unlike the others, he didn't come up the road in which the traveler had used to reach the signpost. Instead, he came down one of the other trails; a steep and little traveled one at that.

"Excuse me, could you help me? I am looking for the fountain of truth. One person told me there is not such place. Another person told me to be open-minded and tolerant on the question. A third told me that all roads lead there. Can you tell me the right way?"

"Indeed, I can" replied the stranger. "I am afraid that those who spoke to you were just guessing. They have never been to the fountain of truth, you see. They could only speculate about it. I, on the other hand, live there. I am the truth. Come follow me."

As he held out his hand to lead the traveler, the traveler saw there was a nail print in the palm of his hand.

Did he take the hand? Or did he stay by the signpost and pitch his tent there?

Will you take the hand of Jesus? Some people prefer not to make any decision and stand by the signpost. Some people are scared of choosing the route that Jesus lays out. Some people have become so cynical and say, "There is no way that if I took the hand of Jesus that I would be led into truth." But there are a few who are open, who haven't had every spark of hope crushed in their hearts. A few who say, "I am going to risk it. I am going to trust that there is one who can lead me to the truth."

Let's pray.

