**Acts 17:16-31**

*“Answering Ignorance”*

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen. Have you ever asked why there are so many religions? At one time, a person could ignore that question and gone on with life. Yet, our western world is now a pluralistic society. Christians must work and live alongside Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Baha’i, and many others. Where did all of these religions come from? As one theologian comments, “It is nothing strange that the non-Christian religions, which seek to reconcile God through human works, appear in well-nigh countless and diverse forms. For these works do not bring peace to the conscience, and the inevitable result is that men keep on devising new works and new forms of worship” (Christina Dogmatics 21).

Jesus gives the shorter answer to why man naturally makes up religions. He says, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts…” (Matt 15:19a). These thoughts are especially about God and salvation haunting humanity from age to age. St. Paul noted such pluralistic confusion during his travels while preaching Jesus and His resurrection. In a Roman world, there were plenty of gods to go around, one available for almost any preference a person had. We face a similar scene today in our post-Christian society. Rather than frustration or despair, Peter tells us, “in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you…” Christ is the only unshakeable truth that God loves a sinful world.

False idols do not sit well with the Holy Spirit. God is a jealous God always seeking to save. The plans of man just do not line up with what God plans. “Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.” Athens was a rich city of legendary glory, a hub of learning and philosophy. For all this wisdom of man, it amounted to the city littered in false worship. Christ was prodding at Paul for His Word alone was life for him. This apostle saw right through the blind ways of men that falls short in facing God. Paul told them, “We ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.” Good news was beyond judgments of men that only lead to idols. Actually, God already judged the gift He would give a whole sinful world.

Some religions we face today have totem poles, statue of a Buddha, or another image. However, man is far more creative in how we want to picture our false gods. Luther says, “Idolatry does not consists merely of erecting an image and praying to it. It is primarily in the heart, which pursues other things and seeks help and consolation from creatures, saints, or devils” (LC Tappert 367:21). The Spirit of truth given by baptism speaks to the false delusions built upon pleasure, success, or personal views. Jesus said, “Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me.” This love makes us see how blind families are when Christ is at the bottom of the list. It points to the Church being sacrificed on the altar of fun for the weekend, success in life, or the demand of sports. It reveals people seeking to judge God on how they feel rather than caring for what His Word actually says. Rather than dead gods of men, the promise from Jesus is that “Because I live, you also will live.”

The ignorant are to hear what the Spirit of the Gospel says. God does not withhold His Word to anyone. It fell upon the philosophers of Athens who treated Paul similar to how the Pharisees and Sadducees treated Jesus. They called the apostle a “babbler” or better translated an “ignorant show-off.” His preaching was something new and they had questions. The problem was that, “…the Epicureans and Stoics, contemplated the means to human happiness in this life” (ACC). They fell on different sides of what that meant be it materialistic or the other a virtues life. Yet, neither saw new life arisen by what God did for eternity. Using the altar to an unknown God, Paul proclaimed what God made known. Man was not in control or even saved by his works for the, “Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything…” Instead, God was the giver of everything for life and salvation. All people had a shared relationship from Him, but natural man was a sinner searching in the dark.

Without the revealed Word that gives the Gospel, man only has reason and emotions. Both are a blessing from God. Both are also, what man ends up worshiping, a curse from the fall into sin by our first parents. It can lead to complete denial of God, but this is foolishness. Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will” (Matt 11:25-26). Likewise, it can be a philosophy built on God’s Law as if “just follow what the Bible says and you’ll be all right” (Duck Dynasty). Sounds nice, but if salvation means comfort in my works we miss what Peter proclaimed, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God…” The Word of Scripture uses the Law to drive us to the risen Jesus who died for sinners. A call goes out for “all people everywhere to repent.” God seeks to reveal a new righteousness by His redeeming work for a sinful world that none can rightly achieve by their works.

Life comes from the risen Jesus and His Spirit gives life. Such idolatry by the Gentiles, were “times of ignorance that God overlooked.” However, times changed at the coming of Christ. His suffering revealed the perfect patients and sacrifice of God that paid the price for all. His resurrection secured the fact that Jesus has perfectly answered God’s anger against the world. To those in Athens, repentance meant pulling down every idol fabricated by man. It was to receive and serve the one man that gave His Word as life for sinners. The fixed Day of Judgment by the righteousness of Jesus confirmed Him to be God’s Son. Raising Him from the dead was assurance from God or certain trust for all that what Jesus says stands. God already gives everything to man, but even more graciously did life arise out of the cross. Boundless love and forgiveness turned the wisdom of Athens to the foolishness of God revealed to save sinners.

Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed. Allelulia! This is the echo of the cross and empty tomb that stands out among all the false gods. Rather than a philosophy for life, God is where He promises to be for sinners in Jesus and His Word. Rather than getting lost in all the religions of man, God turns us to baptism where dying with Jesus we also rise with Him to life everlasting. Actually, God is even not far from us for Jesus assures that He is present with His true body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. To love the Word of Jesus is to trust that He truly loves to save sinners, has changed our lives, and proclaims victory for all in Him on the Last Day. Christ is the only unshakeable truth that God loves a sinful world. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting, Amen.