

Acts 17:22-28a (NRSV)

²²Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For 'In him we live and move and have our being'"

Exodus 19:1-6 (NRSV)

On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ²They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. ³Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: ⁴You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites."

Who are you? Much of the world wants to tell you a lie about it. You are not merely the product of time and random mutation. You are God's creation.

Atheism is fast becoming stylish. Christopher Hitchens' most recent book, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* is currently in the third spot on the NY Times bestseller list. Go a bit down on the list and you'll find evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins', *The God Delusion*. Scoot over to the list of paperback bestsellers and you'll find Sam Harris' latest: *Letter to a Christian Nation*. It follows up his book, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*.

Quite a line-up. These authors are only the latest manifestation of a long-growing belief among the educated elite in this country and Europe that smart people either have or should give up their belief in any sort of god. Regrettably, Christians have often helped this along, as many evangelicals have embraced an anti-intellectual response to modernity.¹

Given the immense intellectual heritage of the Christian church, all this is a shame. From its beginning, Christianity has embraced a life that loves with, as Jesus puts it, heart, soul, mind, and strength. All of it. Head, heart, and hands. Paul brought to his God-given vocation not only a deep faith and vast reserves of energy, but also a towering intellect. He would approve of Alistair McGrath's book, *Intellectuals Need God Too*.

When Paul arrived in Athens on his second missionary journey (see Acts 16-18), he soon headed for the council of the Aeropagus, a group of deep thinking Athenians that had once held a fair bit of power. So far as the Athenians in general, Luke writes, "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21). Deep-thinkers. Lots of them. Perhaps not too surprising given the rich heritage of Greek philosophy and culture. After all, this was the home of Plato and Aristotle and countless other philosophers.

The Athenians had their ideas about the nature of reality. What the world is. Who we are. The problem with the world. Even its solution. In other words, they had a worldview. Everyone does. And the Greeks embraced the idea that there is something larger than themselves, something unseen but quite real, whether it is Plato and Aristotle's first mover or the entertaining pantheon of Greek gods and goddesses.

¹The best book on this anti-intellectualism is Mark Noll's, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*.

When Paul rises to address these men, he talks to them in their language and quotes to them their own philosophers. He gets right to some of their deepest questions, such as the nature of being, so that he might talk to them about the God-Who-Is, the God who created all things, created humans in his image, and who provides everyone with being.²

Darwin“ism”

Since the birth of the Enlightenment more than 200 years ago, we've lived with an increasingly wide ditch between science and religion. Both have been seen as legitimate areas of study but they couldn't really be put together – we kept one in the attic, the other in the basement. Science has been seen as the source of all facts about the universe while religion has been left with matters of faith, devoid of any appeal to facts. I cannot count the number of books I've read that assert something like – “The bible is not a book about history or geography or science, it is a book about matters of faith.”

In retrospect, this separation is somewhat odd, in that the development of modern science depended on the assumption of an orderly and predictable universe. What has changed over the years is the presumed explanation for that order and predictability. Early in the modern/scientific era, it was assumed that God was the designer of this order. However, responding to 18th and 19th century shifts in philosophical outlook, such as Deism, science began explicitly to remove a creator god from its worldview, substituting notions of impersonal mechanisms giving rise to the order of the universe. Of course, Darwin's general theory of evolution¹ was the main impetus to this development. With the explanatory vacancy created by the jettisoning of a creator god, Darwinism, the philosophy, was shaped so as to provide a new story, a competing story that provided explanations for who we are, where we are, the problem, and the solution.

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1. Darwin proposed two theories. The first theory, sometimes referred to as micro-evolution, proposed that random mutation and natural selection creates lasting changes in species and can lead to the creation of new species. This first theory of evolution has been well-supported by scientific evidence. Much more controversial, at the time it was proposed and still today, is Darwin's more general theory of evolution which proposed that all of life has developed only through the mechanisms of random mutation and natural selection. This more general theory is sometimes called macro-evolution and is what people usually mean when they refer to “Darwinism,” as I do.

A treasured possession

The truth is that there is a god and not just any god, but God, the LORD God. And as Paul told the Athenians, God made the world and everything in it. He is near. Indeed, we couldn't get away from him if we tried. Ignore him, yes. Escape, no.

We are not the product of time and random mutation acting on some primordial soup. I'm not just my dog but with a bigger brain. Humans are unique among God's creatures, made in God's image. And as today's passage from Exodus reminds us, God has set us apart for a purpose. We are to be a holy people.

All this, of course, ought to humble us; too often, it makes us prideful and arrogant. We forget our responsibilities; we behave in quite unholy ways. But still, there is a God who has revealed to us who we really are.

But is it true?

How do we know that the claims we make are true? Because, as Paul said to the Athenians, God resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. Christianity stands or falls on the truthfulness of that claim.³

There is only one reason to be a Christian - because you believe that the Christian claims are true. Not because you need help with some aspect of your life or because you want to belong to something. Certainly, becoming a Christian will change the course of your life and help you cope with life's travails. Becoming a Christian will widen your circle of friends and make you part of a worldwide community. But those are consequences of belief, not reasons to believe. If, in the end, you believe that Jesus is largely a mythological figure or simply a very wise person who showed us a better way to live -- than don't bother. No one wants to build their lives on a myth and there is certainly no shortage of wise teachers and self-help books.

Ignore the world's lies. Hold fast to the truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

²Then as now, a philosophical argument revolved around the nature of our being. We call ourselves “human beings,” but aren't we really always “becoming”? None of us are exactly the same from moment to moment. I'm told that I'm losing brain cells by the thousands every day! Heraclitus, one of the Greek philosophers, wisely noted that one can't step into the same river twice. The river too never stays the same. So where do we get our “being?” Paul provides the Athenians with a solution. It is from God, “in whom we live, move, and have our being” (17:28).

³This business of truth, proof, and belief is tricky. The truth is that our lives are built upon what we believe, not what we can prove, for humans can't prove much at all. Perhaps in a future study, I'll have the chance to expand on this.

Darwin“ism” (cont. from the p. 2 text box)

It is very important to note the order of these developments. The loss of belief in a god who is actively involved in his creation left only two options for many in the West – that there is no god (atheism) or that this god got the whole thing started but then left creation to its own devices (the absentee landlord of Deism). As science began to discover that the earth is very ancient and, at one time, was very different from now, a theory was needed to explain, in the absence of God, the plain fact that birds and bees actually do exist. Darwin provided the needed theory. In much of the scientific community, Darwinism became a necessary given in a world with no god. Just as Christians claim that the question of who created God is a nonsensical question – God simply is – scientific materialists¹ hold that the question of who created evolution is a nonsensical question – evolution simply is, needing no explanation or creator. To a materialist, evolution is a tenant of faith, a truism, not something to be proved.

Indeed, though I referred earlier to Darwinism as a theory, in large segments of the scientific community Darwinism no longer passes the test for being a scientific theory. Karl Popper has shown that for a theory to be useful in the advancement of knowledge, it must be falsifiable. After all, if there could never be any evidence which could disprove a “theory” what good is it – the “theory” becomes nothing more than a truism, to be taken on faith. For materialists, evolutionary theory cannot be disproved, because doing so would require another explanation for all that is and the only other explanation is some sort of creator god. In practice, Darwinism is a philosophy not a scientific theory.³

1. Because many scientists began to see science as not so much a matter of method, but a unifying evolutionary theory of all that is, the result was the rise of what is sometimes called scientific materialism, or naturalism, or physicalism. The materialist story, which is too often taken as fact, proposes that nature is made up solely of material stuff and that we and our world are solely the result of time, chance, random mutation, and natural selection acting on this eternal stuff. For the materialist, there is no such thing as mind or consciousness or spirit – just material stuff in various configurations. Christians do not deny the effects of time, chance, random mutation, and natural selection – we just don’t think it is the whole story.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, JUNE 3 - 9

Sunday, Hosea 1:1-9 Why do you think that God wants Hosea to marry a prostitute? What do the children’s names mean? Why these names? Give all this, what do you think God is about to say to Israel?

Monday, Hosea 2:1-13 Why does God use the imagery of marriage and adultery to describe Israel’s (the people of God’s) treatment of God? What is their chief failing, their biggest sin? What are the consequences of this sin?

Tuesday, Hosea 2:14-23 What do these verses say to you about the nature of God? How could you understand your relationship with God based on these verses? Can you imagine God ever abandoning you?

Wednesday, Hosea 3 & 4 What does God ask of Hosea now? What do you make of these juxtaposed portraits of God’s accusations and God’s love? Why is all this cast in the image of marriage? Any word here about our own marriages?

Thursday, Hosea 11:1 – 12:1 Can you hear God’s disappointment and sadness? Verses 11:8-9 are especially remarkable. Keep these in mind the next time you hear people make pronouncements about God’s wrath. The LORD is a God of love, not of wrath, as is fully revealed in Jesus Christ. The OT passages about God’s wrath have to be read in this larger context. The Bible moves forward from an eye for an eye to unlimited forgiveness.

Friday, Hosea 14 How is this chapter a proper culmination of the entire book? Enjoy and appreciate the beauty of the poetry. These are word-pictures of God’s hoped for relationship with his people.

Saturday, Philemon What do you think are the circumstances of this letter? How does Paul see this slave, Onesimus? How does he want Philemon to see him? What might this letter say about Paul’s attitudes toward slaves?

Sermon Notes

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

There are few subjects that get as mishandled by the popular press as this business of God, evolution, creation, and Darwin. Too often it starts from misunderstandings and degenerates into each side knocking down one straw man after another. At its heart, the question isn't about evolution per se, but about the most basic questions of life. Is there a Creator who created all that is, or is the stuff of the universe, even you and I, merely the result of random mutation acting on some primordial stuff over billions of years? Hence, the questions are theological and philosophical, not scientific.

Such questions get to what is often called a "worldview." These are the answers we have to the most basic questions: Who are we? Where are we? Why is this place so messed up? What's the solution? Everybody carries around answers, even if they can't articulate the answers.

How would you answer these questions? How do you think an atheist would answer them? How about a Buddhist? Here is how N.T. Wright, a New Testament scholar and bishop, answers them in his book, *The New Testament and the People of God*:

- "(1) Who are we? We are humans made in the image of the creator. We have responsibilities that come with this status. We are not fundamentally determined by race, gender, social class, geographical location; nor are we simply pawns in a deterministic game.
- (2) Where are we? We are in a good and beautiful, though transient, world, the creation of the god in whose image we are made. We are not in an alien world, as the Gnostic imagines; nor in a cosmos to which we owe allegiance as to a god, as the pantheist would suggest.
- (3) What is wrong? Humanity has rebelled against the creator. This rebellion reflects a cosmic dislocation between the creator and the creation, and the world is consequently out of tune with its created intention.
- (4) What is the solution? The creator has acted, is acting, and will act within his creation to deal with the weight of evil set up by human rebellion, and to bring his world to the end for which it was made, namely that it should resonate with his own presence and glory. This action, of course, is focused upon Jesus and the Spirit of the creator."

How do his answers compare to yours? Bear in mind that everyone has a worldview whether they actually ever thought about it or not. In fact, as soon as someone says, "That's just how things are!" you know that you've run right into their worldview, their most deeply held views of the way things are.