

Stumbling Over Elephants

Acts 17:26-29

Introduction

In a recent editorial, Joseph Stowell, the president of Moody Bible Institute, wrote these provocative words,

If God were to visibly show up today, many of us think we'd run up to Him and high-five Him for the good things He has done; some of us think we'd run up and hug Him or ask Him for an answer to that nagging theological question; others might even demand He tell us why that tragedy in our lives was permitted to rob us of our happiness and comfort. The truth is, we would do none of these things. We would, instead, all fall trembling at His feet as His awesome, mighty, and fearful glory filled the room.

Our evangelical culture tends to take the awesome reality of God and downsize Him so He can fit into our "buddy system." The way we talk about Him, the way we pray, and more strikingly, the way we live shows that we have somehow lost our sense of being awestruck in the presence of a holy and all-powerful God.

Does that phrase that we have "downsized God," bother you?

Frankly, ladies and gentlemen, idolatry, a sin that most of us would never consider to have committed, is nothing less than turning God into something He is not. It does not have to be an idol of wood or stone, it can be the belief in the human heart that says, "God is whoever and whatever I want Him to be for me."

For some, God has been downsized to a divine genie. In other words, rub the lamp of prayer and get your three wishes. Everything is fine in that person's system of idolatry, until he does not get his three wishes! God has become a god who gives what we want.

One psychologist recently wrote,

People walk into my office and say they are Christians. I see absolutely no difference between their lives and the lives of non-Christians, except that they want to be happy and they expect God to make it so.

For others, God has been reduced to a doting grandfather. He would never think badly toward His children, even when they sin. God the great grandfather, understands that you are just being who you are – no need to get upset. Don't give the kid a spanking; what he needs is some ice cream. Which system would you choose?

Then, there is the ever popular God who has been demoted to the corporate position of cosmic CEO. He is enamored with stocks and bonds and you can now rest assured that, whenever your company speaks, God has spoken. If your corporation wants to promote you or transfer you or compromise you, surely they would not have offered that or done that without somehow expressing the will of God. So you assume, since it makes good business sense, and God and good business sense never disagree, this must be what God wants. Study the characters of scripture and discover how many of God's people were demoted rather than promoted.

It is time to be re-introduced to our great and powerful God, for He has become an unknown God to our generation. He has been downsized, trivialized, and re-defined.

Voltaire, the cynical agnostic, was right when he said, “God created man, and man returned the favor.”

Review

So, the apostle Paul stands in the capital city of idolatry – Athens, Greece – with its 30,000 statues of gods and goddesses all around him. He is deeply troubled by one particular monument – the monument erected in honor of “An Unknown God”.

In Acts, chapter 17, he moves from the city streets to the hillside where the Areopagus is located. This was an outdoor courtroom where thirty Athenian judges sat and philosophers gathered. He declares:

- My God is more than a monument!
- My God is the creator God who made everything that is!
- My God is the almighty mover and shaker of planet earth!

That is where we stopped in our last discussion.

Paul’s Bold Declaration - Continued

Now, in our fourth exposition of this paragraph, let us begin with verse 26 of Acts, chapter 17.

and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation

Paul is, in one sweeping sentence, saying several things about God.

God is the God of anthropology

First, this mighty mover and shaker of planet earth is the God of anthropology. He made from one man (Adam) every nation.

Anthropology is the study of the physical, social, material, and cultural development of mankind.

Who is responsible for those things? Did they happen by chance? Who came up with those distinctive cultural differences?

I am headed for India in a couple of months. I have been warned that life is totally different there, and that includes the food.

My assistant, Steve Matthews, and his wife have become friends with an Indian family living on their block. Steve was telling me that this family recently hosted the Matthews for a full meal, right from the cookbooks of India. Steve said, “While it was wonderful, it was so spicy with different kinds of spice that, when we returned home, my head was buzzing. I even felt a little disoriented. Stephen,” he said, “you need to come over and eat with them just to prepare yourself for India.”

I said, “I’m gonna be prepared . . . I’m packing a lot of crackers and a big jar of peanut butter . . . boxes of Snackwells and frosted flakes. I’m gonna be prepared.”

Who created all the physical distinctions? There are white people and black people and brown people and tints of red brown and yellowish white. Some people have dark hair, some people have blonde hair, some people are praying for hair.

Consider the additional fact that, even in the midst of each national distinction, no two people are exactly alike. Each has his own fingerprint and unique features. There is no one else on planet earth, even among your own race, who looks exactly like you. Praise God, right?!

Who created billions of originals? The mover and shaker of planet earth, the God who made it all.

When Paul said that God created every nation of mankind, he was confronting the Greek belief that they were a special race, uniquely created by the gods from the dust of Greek soil. They believed that they were a superior, master race.

Paul, in effect, said, “Where did you come up with that dumb idea? The God who created you, created every other nation living on planet earth.”

Germans are not better than Jews; Japanese are not superior to Chinese; Europeans are not better than Africans. If you believe that you are superior to someone else because of his nationality, it is not so much that you do not understand nationalities, it is that you, like the Athenians, do not know God.

Understand also, that Paul is subtly getting across the message that he is not introducing to them some local Jewish god. He is introducing to them the only true and living God, Lord of heaven and earth, creator and ruler of every nation.

God is the God of history

God is also the God of history. Notice verse 26b again.

. . . having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation

God not only exercises His power in creating the nations, He exercises His sovereignty in ruling the nations. Everything that happens comes about because He either causes it or consciously allows it. Nothing enters into history or could even exist outside of history that does not come under the complete control of God.

Tony Evans told the story of the cowboy who applied for health insurance. The agent asked him, "Have you ever had any accidents?"

The cowboy replied, "No, I haven't had any accidents. I was bitten by a rattlesnake once and a horse kicked me in the ribs. That laid me up for awhile, but I haven't had any accidents."

The agent said, "Wait a minute, I'm confused. A rattlesnake bit you and a horse kicked you – weren't those accidents?"

The cowboy replied, "Nope, they did that on purpose."

He had the right idea – things do not just happen. Everything that occurs does so under the hand of a sovereign God. There is no such thing, in reality, as accidents. God is ruling, even when it does not look like He is ruling. God is in control.

Even when the world seems full of chaos, God is engineering the chaos toward His purpose. Even when things are falling apart, God is orchestrating the falling apart of those things to fulfill His divine will. The reason we do not think that way is because we have downsized God.

Key verses

Listen to the voice of scripture properly define the Almighty Mover and Shaker of planet earth:

- Job wrote, in chapter 23, verse 13b,
. . . what His [God's] soul desires, that He does.
- In Job, chapter 42, verse 2,
I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.
- David wrote in Psalm, chapter 115, verse 3,
But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.
- In Psalm, chapter 135, verse 6,

Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps.

- In Proverbs, chapter 16, verse 4,
The Lord has made everything for its own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil.
- In Isaiah, chapter 45, verse 7,
The One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the Lord who does all these.
- Go to the end of this Holy Book and read in Revelation, chapter 19, verse 6,
. . . For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.

The church is in desperate need of this truth. It seems panic stricken over the latest decision out of Washington DC or the latest perversion on prime time T.V.

What is even more troubling is that in the last two decades, the church has spent millions of dollars and millions of man-hours attempting to win a cultural war – as if getting homosexuality out of Disney and off of television and getting prayer back into schools will give God the victory.

God's side will win. In fact, my friend, God's side has already won. He is not the ruler of this nation only if there is a Republican majority. He is the ruler of this nation because He is almighty God.

The church seems focused on the expressions of sin and is, at great expense, attempting to restrict those sinful expressions as if that would solve the problem.

By the way, the problem is not that prayer is not in schools. The problem is, prayer is not in homes.

Let me tell you what the mission of the church is not. Now, this is shocking and goes against the grain of what millions of people are involved in today. I do not mind being different, as long as I am biblical. The mission of the church in any generation, is not to remove the outward expressions of sin in a society, no matter how perverted they may be. Sinful society will act sinfully, and God's word predicts that evil will advance, not retreat. Men will become worse and worse until they become so evil that they eventually worship and follow the devil himself in the form of the antichrist.

If removing the expression of evil was the solution, then rather than proclaim the gospel to the Athenians, Paul would have slipped out one night with a sledgehammer and crushed all the idols in town. He could have then announced, “There, I’ve rescued Athens from idolatry.”

He has not, however, because the town is still filled with idolaters. Instead, you find Paul surrounded by idols, preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and His resurrection.

Our mission, like Paul’s, is to shine – and the darker the night, the brighter the light.

Now I am not suggesting that it is wrong to be a Christian politician (to vote and to pray for our nation, that is). One author wrote, “Slouching toward Gomorrah.” But picketing, boycotting, writing newspaper editors, getting on the radio, or jamming the White House phone lines and cursing the darkness focuses our time, money, prayers, and efforts on the symptoms and not the solution.

Expect the darkness to produce darkness. Evil men will display their evil. I have not found in the scriptures where I have the right to be free from exposure to that evil. But what I do find is that I am responsible to shine with this great church in order to penetrate the darkness.

Has it ever occurred to you that a lighthouse never once got rid of a storm? We are to influence the hearts of people, which will then change the expressions of people. And we are to leave the appointed times and the boundaries of habitation of this country to its Divine Ruler, Almighty God.

One model of that proper perspective is a pastor in Los Angeles who was once a leader in the Democratic party. He had been a ward leader for the Democratic party in Texas before moving to California. As ward leader, his job was to have a block captain for every block of his ward so that when election day came, his block captains could get out the vote. Then he became a Christian and eventually, became a pastor and began to serve in Los Angeles. He said to himself, “If I could organize a city to get out the vote for the Democrats, why can’t I organize a city to get out the gospel of Jesus Christ?” So he took the same strategy and began to establish Christian block captains for every block. Los Angeles has more than 9,000 blocks. So far, he is up to 1,900.

That is focusing on the solution, not the symptoms!

Now notice verses 27 and 28 of Acts, chapter 17.

that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, “For we also are His children.”

Paul is quoting from pagan poetry. One of the poets he quotes is the same poet who released the flock of sheep from the Areopagus in hopes of saving Athens from a terrible plague.

What Paul applies to God was a quote from Epimenides, who said the same thing of Zeus as Paul said of God in verse 28a,

. . . in Him we live and move and exist . . .

Zeus was considered the giver of life. Paul says, “No, the unknown God, my God, is the giver of life.”

What Paul does is use Greek poets to prove the belief in every human heart that he has a connection to a divine being. Paul said to them, in verse 27, in effect, “That hidden belief is given so . . .”

that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him . . .

Now, understand that Paul is speaking in a way that expects a negative response. In other words, he is saying, “God did all of this, and He rules over everything. He’s given you a sense that there is more than meets the eye; so that mankind would grope after that Being, although man will never be able to discover God.”

What is very clever is that Paul uses the same word for “groping” after God that one of Athens’ most famous citizens used in his famous work entitled, *The Odyssey*. Homer, who lived nearly nine hundred years before the time of Paul, told the story of Odysseus, a Greek warrior, who, in one part of the story, is captured by Cyclops, the one-eyed giant. Odysseus is able to blind the giant with a spear. He and his men then try to sneak out of the cave where they are being held, but have difficulty because the blinded giant is groping about trying to grasp them and kill them. They finally are able to escape.

Paul selects that same word to describe the Athenians attempts to connect with spirituality. They are groping about, but are unable to grasp God.

Ephesians, chapter 4, verses 17 and 18, says,

. . . the Gentiles [“unbelievers”] . . . walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding . . . because of the hardness [“blindness”] of their heart

II Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 4, says,

. . . the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

In Matthew, chapter 15, verse 14, Jesus Christ said that the religious leaders of His day were,

. . . blind guides of the blind . . .

The problem was, and is, that without the spiritual awakening or eyesight brought about by salvation through Christ, a person might be able to gather some truth about God, but still come up with entirely wrong conclusions.

Let me illustrate this with the following poem:

The Blind Men and the Elephant

*It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.*

*The first approached the elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
"God bless me! but the elephant
Is very like a wall!"*

*The second, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, "Ho! what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me 'tis mighty clear
This wonder of an elephant
Is very like a spear!"*

*The third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
"I see," quoth he, "the elephant
Is very like a snake!"*

*The fourth reached out his eager hand,
And felt about the knee.*

*"What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain," quoth he;*

*"'Tis clear enough the elephant
Is very like a tree."*

*The fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said, "E'en the blindest man*

*Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can
This marvel of an elephant
Is very like a fan!"*

*The sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
"I see," quoth he, "the elephant
Is very like a rope."*

*And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!*

The Bible says that an unbeliever's spiritual eyes are blind. The spiritual understanding of their minds is blind, and their hearts are blind. They have blinded eyes, blinded minds, blinded hearts.

So what do spiritually blind people do? Look at verse 29 of Acts, chapter 17.

. . . [they] think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.

God created man in His own image, and man returned the favor.

Perhaps you are wondering if there is any hope for America? If you were to ask me, I would have to say, "I don't know, but I do know Someone who does. He is the One who has determined the times of this nation and the boundaries of its habitation."

I also know that the only hope for our nation is for the church to return to its primary task of introducing its world to the Unknown God. He is

more than a monument. He made it all. He is the Almighty Mover and Shaker; Lord of heaven and earth.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/11/1998 by Stephen Davey.

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