

Is Christianity too Narrow in Our Culture?

Acts 17:22-31

John Breon

I still get a kick out of this joke that's been around for a while:

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"

"Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over. (by Emo Phillips;

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/sep/29/comedy.religion>)

We all think like that to some degree. Many of us tend to narrow down the range of who's acceptable. We have a need to be right and we want to be with others we think are right. The world looking at the church probably sees our divisions as that narrow and silly. Someone has said that if you belong to a Christian subculture, it means everything to you. If you don't belong to it, you probably don't know it exists.

Others, reacting against that narrow view, have an almost anything-goes view of God and faith and church. We're so afraid of being seen as

narrow-minded that we don't believe much of anything specific or particular. For some, that's the best way to get along in a society, a world, that includes many different belief systems and worldviews. But do we give up too much when we give up what's particular about Christian faith?

The Scripture reading from Acts 17 gives an example of the Apostle Paul's approach as he encountered different worldviews in the city of Athens. Paul took the gospel into the synagogue, into the marketplace, into an educational setting, and, maybe, into a political setting (the Council of the Areopagus was possibly like a city council as well as a gathering of philosophers).

Paul arrived in Athens and spent some time there alone, waiting for Timothy and Silas to join him. Seeing the city's many idols distressed him. So he went to the synagogue, the Jewish place of worship and study. That's where Paul usually started in the various cities he visited. But he also went to the marketplace every day. That's where he encountered various philosophers. Some were Epicureans, who saw the goal of life as seeking pleasure and avoiding pain and fear. They believed there might be gods, but the gods have little or nothing to do with people. There were also some Stoics. They were pantheists, that is, they believed that all reality is god and there's a "world soul" that animates everything. At their best, the Stoics were moral and had a high sense of duty. They emphasized reason and individual self-sufficiency.

These philosophers started debating Paul. His gospel preaching puzzled them. Some wondered, "What's this babbler talking about?" Others thought he was advocating foreign gods. They seemed to think that he was talking about two gods named Jesus and Anastasis (resurrection).

What philosophies and idolatries do we encounter? The Epicurean and Stoic ways of thinking still echo today. We run into various forms of atheism, where people claim there is no god or there's insufficient evidence for believing in God. Related to this is naturalism or materialism that says all that exists is material reality or what we see in nature. More and more, we encounter other religions that are not materialistic, but that don't share faith in Jesus Christ as God with us. Then there's another kind of materialism that says real happiness comes from accumulating lots of stuff.

Nationalism or civil religion, where allegiance to a country or government competes with allegiance to God, is a danger.

In recent years, another competing religion has been identified. A few years ago, some researchers published results of a study that looked at the religious views of American teenagers. The teenagers in the study would be young adults by now. And, the researchers saw that people of various ages hold this view. A lot of Americans see faith or religion as a call to be good, nice, moral people. Their goal in life is to be happy and feel good about themselves. They think God is out there somewhere, but he's not involved much in life here unless they need him to resolve a problem. (For more on this, see Christian Smith, *On "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" as U.S. Teenagers' Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith*, www.ptsem.edu/uploadedFiles/School_of_Christian_Vocation_and_Mission/Institute_for_Youth_Ministry/Princeton_Lectures/Smith-Moralistic.pdf, accessed 10/1/14.) This is kind of a hodgepodge of beliefs that is incomplete and is not the gospel.

The philosophers of Athens brought Paul to a meeting of their council. They wanted to hear this new teaching he was bringing. Luke comments that everybody in Athens spent all their time talking about and listening to new ideas. They were more interested in what was new than in what was true. Now, just because something is new doesn't make it untrue, and old truth can be expressed in new ways. But it seems these people weren't interested in truth, just novelty.

Paul starts talking to them. He doesn't start with the Hebrew scriptures like he would in the synagogue. Those Greeks wouldn't understand that. So he starts with what they do understand. He acknowledges how religious they are. Then he points out that their city even had an altar "To An Unknown God." Now he starts to tell them about how the true God is known.

He starts with God as creator who made the world and everything in it, who doesn't live in temples made by humans and who really needs nothing from us. God is the source of life and breath and everything. God created the human race and remains involved with it. God's aim was that people would seek him and reach out for him and find him.

Then, Paul says, God is not far from any one of us. God is near, God is available, God is accessible. Paul even quotes some Greek poets to make this point: "For in him we live and move and have our being" and "We are his offspring."

What points of contact can we find in our culture? What songwriters or poets or artists or authors express some truth about God and life that we can use to explain the good news? It's said often that "all truth is God's truth." Wherever there is truth, there is some reflection of God. Christianity is not so narrow that we can't recognize goodness and beauty and truth wherever they are found. We can appreciate them and affirm them and let them point to even greater truth and beauty and goodness.

God is more than an impersonal creator. God is the source of our life, the one who gives us birth. And since humans are God's offspring, we must be somewhat like God. Humanity gives some kind of picture of God. God is personal, relational, rational, loving. God is not like images made of metal or stone.

Paul has been speaking in general. Now he starts getting more specific. There is a "narrowness" to Christianity. Jesus himself said the road that leads to life is narrow (Matthew 7:14). There are some particulars that set Christian faith and life apart. Paul says that God is not only creator but also judge. God calls all people everywhere to repent. Repentance is sorrow for sin and the brokenness it causes, it's a change of mind or attitude, and it's turning to go in a new direction. Repentance is like the porch of the house of life with God.

The proof Paul cites for God's coming judgment and the call to repent is that God raised Jesus from the dead.

As Paul moves into talking about "the man God has appointed," he implies Jesus Christ. But he doesn't have the chance to proclaim Christ explicitly because the council reacts intensely to his mention of the resurrection. That's not something Greeks believed in. Some mocked Paul and others dismissed him. "The Resurrection demanded faith. Any God who raised the dead would require more than philosophical reflection" (Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *The Drumbeat of Love* 217).

Jesus is the dividing line. In the Gospels, he's sometimes seen as the stumbling block, the scandal. Faith in Jesus Christ does narrow our options; it is exclusive; it squeezes out everything that's not consistent with him. But when we come to him and through him, life opens out into a spaciousness we couldn't imagine.

So, is Christianity too narrow? Some branches of it are narrow in the wrong sense. We get so caught up in our own way of doing things. But in another sense, Christian faith is both narrow and wide. As one speaker on Explore God says, "Truth is narrow and grace is wide." There is one true and living God. He has given his Son Jesus as the one Savior. But Jesus died for everyone. And God's Spirit is at work everywhere in everyone, giving the opportunity to repent and believe. We have that opportunity now and we can share it with others. It's interesting that we're considering this question on *World Communion Sunday* when we emphasize our fellowship with Christians in every part of the world, from every culture. What may look narrow from the outside or at the beginning is so much wider and more open than we know.

I read an illustration of the difference between moralistic, do-it-yourself religion and the real gospel. The moralistic "gospel" is like a sick person striving to make himself well without medicine. He has cancer, but he's convinced that he can beat the disease by working out, eating right and so forth. But, in the end, he'll probably die without putting himself in the hands of a medical professional. *The* gospel of Jesus is also like a person with cancer, who puts herself fully in the hands of a trained medical professional who administers the known treatment toward a cure. She *yields* to the doctor to be treated. The signs of health are known from the beginning, but experiencing them, given her condition, requires giving up trying to cure herself and allowing the doctor to administer the cure. If that's narrow, that's just how it is.

Jesus is the Great Physician and he is the cure. Only Jesus can free us from the rule of sin in our lives and bring us to true forgiveness, new life, wholeness and holiness. Our "job," our part is to submit to his transforming power (www.patheos.com/blogs/rogerolson/2014/09/follow-up-to-my-post-about-the-false-gospel-of-christian-moralism, accessed 10/1/14).