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To Those Bored with Church, Life, & Their Identity

June 6, 2010

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Acts 17:16-34

My main goal in life is to get to heaven and take as many people with me as possible. Part of my job is to wonder: Why are so many people bored with church? Why are so many people bored with life, and bored with themselves? What can we do differently? What can we do better? Sometimes I wonder: if every church program at every church was operating at 100% capacity would our world change? Or would people still be bored? I want the Gospel to go further. It reminds me of a classic opening

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hdjL8WXjlGI>

These are the voyages of the Starship Enterprise, its continuing mission to explore strange new worlds and to boldly go where no one has gone before. But we don't even get *close* to "strange new worlds." We're afraid to bring our faith "where no one has gone before" because it's awkward. We're more comfortable here, where people understand us. But imagine if the Starship Enterprise did nothing but circle the earth! (No one would have heard about William Shatner. We wouldn't have had 4 spinoffs and half a dozen movies). ☺ But that's what we do. Like the Enterprise, you and I were designed for so much more. No wonder we're bored! And without us boldly going where no one has gone before with God's message, it's no wonder so many people feel abandoned and hopeless.

We live in a world that is leaving meaning behind. HOW'D THIS HAPPEN? Our worldview shifted in the Renaissance from being God-centered, to the Enlightenment in which humanity replaced God as the center, followed by a second shift in the 1800s we call Romanticism, which is the idea that the world hums with the supernatural but is absent of God. It is filled with opportunities that lack any inherent meaning. Out of which the philosopher Nietzsche dismantled Christianity and its God-centered view. What was left was *nihilism*, the view that nothing of meaning exists. There are no facts, only interpretations... We're left with the worldview that there *are* no absolutes. It's not a new worldview as much as a death of any coherent worldview. A Christian staff member at Stanford sums it up: "It's fine to pursue truth as long as you don't find it."

WHAT DO WE DO NOW? In other words, what do you say today to a society that says God is dead and Elvis lives? The good news is, God has shown us in the book of Acts 17. In many ways, the 21st Century is very much like 1st Century Athens, when Paul visited it. The 1st Century Roman culture lived beyond meaning and purpose, beyond right and wrong, beyond God. They were consumers, spectators, and self-absorbed individuals. You know Athens, because you work there. You live there. And it invades your living room, your bedroom, your computer, and thus your thought life and attitude all day and night on increasingly watched screens. Listen to this account in Acts 17:16-32...

"While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. 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.

1. Paul was "greatly distressed." He had a heart for these people far from God.
2. Paul talked with them, reasoning in the marketplace, on their turf.
3. Paul focused on Jesus and the resurrection. Remember it's good news, not a hammer!

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.)

1. Paul got their attention. Are you saying anything or living in a way as to get anyone's attention? Or, do you live so much like the rest of the world that your life doesn't look any different from theirs?
2. Notice Paul went *to* them. (He didn't wait for *them* to visit *him*!)
3. Paul gently, graciously set himself apart from their basic beliefs.

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at 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.

1. Paul became a student of the culture. He didn't bash it. (Most of us are so comfortable, so wealthy, so caught up in "it," we're *blind* to our culture, like the Athenians. We can't even distinguish that our culture differs from God's best for life!)
2. Something else: Paul knew that every human being worships something.
3. Paul used their culture and their terms to describe God to them. Here's how he made the jump:

"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 people life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation 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 we 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.'

1. Paul told them about God.
2. Paul reminded them of their own culture: Their many temples, their poets.
3. Paul realized God was already at work in their lives.

"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all people by raising him from the dead."

1. Paul tells them about a personal relationship with God.
2. Paul calls them to another way of living. There's still a call to repent, to be transformed.

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 Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others."

1. Paul took the initiative and left the results up to God, and experienced success. Now there were Greek believers named Dionysius—after the god of wine!

Here's what you and I become to a world that has left meaning and purpose behind:

We become Meaning-Makers.

1. *"To just read the Bible, attend church, and avoid 'big' sins—is this passionate, wholehearted love for God?"* (Francois Fenelon). Obviously no, it's not. There's *so* much more. But that's why the rest of the world feels meaningless and we're bored! We've forgotten there are amazing biblical ways of answering basic questions of life and meaning.
2. The greatest gift we can give to this world lost in space is a sense of meaning: The world ripples with meaning simply because God is. We just point them to meaning. Simply ask good questions and then listen.
3. There is meaning even in death. Woody Allen said "It's not so much that I'm afraid of death, I just don't want to be there when it happens." Death fractures every family, breaks every friendship, and cuts every

life short. The Eastern view sees history as a circle, and we return as someone or something else, with no memory or meaning. The Western view sees history as random splashes of chance. No wonder our only response is despair! But to this, God adds a third view of life and death. It's not endless repetition or painful randomness. The Christian views death totally uniquely: not with despair but hope. Because Jesus died and rose again, we have hope, not as the world has, like wishful thinking, but hope that we live out today, and it gives our lives meaning.

We become Truth Tellers.

1. We communicate the option of truth. If someone insists it's not possible to know anything for sure about religious things, it can be helpful to probe a bit. "The only thing we can know about religious things is that we can't know anything for certain?" Why is truth not even an option?
2. Like Paul we speak the truth about Pluralism: The fact of diversity, (that there are many faith options sincerely held by 1000s of people) does *not* mean pluralism (that everybody's faith is equally valid and true). *Sincerity* does not determine truth. Reality does.
3. We speak God's Word into our reality. Either there's life on Mars or there's not. Either there is a personal God or there's not. Either Jesus is God with us or he's not. Either I will live past death or I will not. Either the tomb was empty or it was not. When it comes to reality, the answer can never be "All of the above." Learn what God says about it!
4. We *winsomely engage* in pointing people to look outside themselves. Most of us decide truth by consulting with one source: *ourselves*. Do you see the problem? There may or may not be a God, but my opinion doesn't tell me much. Our only option is to look outside ourselves.

We become Faithful Friends.

1. Because it's not about us, we can be honest about our struggles. Our streets, homes, and churches are filled with the walking wounded. Let's not be a hotel for saints, let's be a teaching hospital for sinners! Be includers: name your sin, and let Jesus start to heal you!
2. Establish common ground. Start from scratch. People don't know all the churchy language. But they do know love. And that takes time. Have them over for a meal.
3. Establish common ground through pop culture and common interests, like Paul did. You don't have to look hard for the search for God.
4. Keep Jesus at the center. Christianity is about one thing: Who is Jesus, and what does that mean for me?

**We claim our _____ IDENTITY _____ in Christ,
and enter into a _____ VOYAGE _____ with him.**

Our identity is found in God. We just have to discover it, not create it. Who we are is ultimately defined by our having been made right with God through Jesus Christ. It's all about who He is. We are restored to wholeness, becoming men and women that we were created to be. The way out of this worldview of meaningless, purposeless living, and boredom is Jesus' invitation: Jesus says "I have a map. I AM the Way. **Enter into a VOYAGE with me.** It won't be easy, but it will be worth it. And when the journey leads to difficult places, I'll be with you. I will never leave you nor forsake you. It's a voyage of significance, of sacrifice, of hope for the world and a future. May you boldly go, and take as many with you as you can! Amen.

STUDY GUIDE Acts 22 – 26

Monday: Read Acts 22. Paul Speaks to the Crowd in Jerusalem. Paul gets permission to speak to the crowd. He tells his background as a God-fearing Jew, his conversion to Jesus, and the vision from God to go with the Gospel to the hated Gentiles. That's when things get ugly! He is saved only by the fact that he is a Roman citizen. Have you ever shared your story with someone else? How has your faith in Jesus redirected your life in a surprising way?

Tuesday: Read Acts 23. Espionage, Manipulation, and Paul. Still in Jerusalem, now before the Sanhedrin, Paul gets the Sadducees and Pharisees in a squabble over the resurrection! His nephew saves the day, hearing

of the plot to kill Paul, and Paul is guarded and moved to Caesarea. Why do you think the authorities When you face death, what do you want to have accomplished for God by then? Take some steps toward that goal this week! When have you risked in order to help someone, like Paul's nephew did? What do these incidents show you about a Christ-follower's relationship to civic authority?

Wednesday: Read Acts 24. Courtroom Politics. The High Priest and crew now comes to Caesarea to witness against Paul before Felix the governor (He ruled Judea from 52-59AD). Read Paul's defense. Note that Christianity is not subversive, but rests on the Hebrew faith. Have you been wrongly accused? What's the difference between "being well-acquainted with the Way" (v22) and being a true believer? How would you do in prison for 2 years over something like this?

Thursday: Read Acts 25. The New Governor & Another Defense. Felix is replaced by Festus. Festus arrives and the Jews demand Paul killed. Festus is confused and consults Herod Agrippa (the son of Herod in Acts 12). If someone wanted to accuse you of being a Christ-follower, what evidence would there be in the past week? When you have questions about your faith, to whom do you turn?

Friday: Read Acts 26. Paul Testifies Before Herod Agrippa. Here is Paul's final defense. What his life was like before encountering Christ; what happened in the encounter with Christ; and what he is doing now. Can you describe your spiritual journey in these 3 ways? Find a friend and practice with him or her.

To Those Bored with Church, Life, & Their Identity Sermon Notes

Acts 12 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at 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.

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"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone— an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent... He has given proof of this to all people by raising him from the dead."

...A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others."

We become _____-makers.

- We communicate a coherent and compelling Christian worldview.
- We live meaningful lives and share them with others.
- We just point them to meaning, simply because God is.
- In life and death, we respond to despair with hope.

We become _____-tellers.

- We communicate the option of truth.
- We speak the truth about pluralism.
- We speak God's Word into our reality.
- We winsomely engage in pointing people to look outside themselves.

We become _____-friends.

- Be honest about struggles.
- We become includers.
- We establish common ground.
- Keep Jesus at the center. Christianity is about one thing: Who is Jesus, and what does that mean for me?

**We claim our _____ in Christ,
and enter into a _____ with him.**