

(aka God): Unknown God?

Reconnect – June 5, 2011

(aka God)

How what He's been called shows who He continues to be

Agnosto Theo:

(Unknown God?)

June 5, 2011



Text: Acts 17:22-36; James 4:8-10

Key Thought: The God who reveals Himself in the Bible continues to show people who He is today.

So Paul, standing before the council, addressed them as follows: “Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: ‘To an Unknown God.’ This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I’m telling you about. He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn’t live in man-made temples, and human hands can’t serve his needs—for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries. His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and exist. As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ (Acts 17:22-28, NLT)

Intro: the end(ish) of Oprah



- This past couple of weeks the focus was right where it always seemed to be she wanted it – on herself
- Over the 25 years of her show we saw some different themes come out again and again, trends that she managed to either be ahead of or make her own and surf them to full advantage
- One of them was the interaction between spirituality and self-help:

The Oprah Winfrey Show, the most popular talk show on TV, is airing its farewell episode Wednesday. After a memorable 25-year run, Winfrey will be leaving daytime television with a more quiet and personal show of simply thanking her viewers. It's the finale episode of one of the world's most powerful women that millions of people are expected to watch today. With a wide fan base and a long list of celebrity supporters, her influence is undeniable. But some have gone as far as to deem her as a sort of spiritual leader. And her "gospel" message all these years has been about "you", observed Kathryn Lofton, author of *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*. Lofton, assistant professor of American studies and religious studies at Yale, told Salon.com that the "good news" that she has been sharing for more than two decades is "that if you take hold of your life, if you discover (as she says) your best life, anything is possible". Additionally, "the good news is her revelations about her best life lived, she says, in service to you," Lofton added. Winfrey's spiritual guidance appealed to a wide audience as they saw her as someone outside established power and religion. "This is a religion for those who don't want to be religious, but want to feel revelation," Lofton explained to Salon.com.

Dave Black, Christianpost, "What's Oprah's Spiritual Legacy?" – May 25, 2011

- More specifically, it was about pluralism – that God could be one thing for you, and another thing for you, and a third, completely opposite thing for you, but that each of you were right – that spirituality most importantly began and ended with you, tapping into the spirit of the universe, and living as felt best for you, and helping others along the way
- It was a very seductive message – as Rousseau is reported to have said,

"God created man in his own image. And man, being a gentleman, returned the favour."

- It's much easier to disbelieve, or to doubt, or to refuse to make up your mind, in some ways, than to take a definitive position – because it's much more tolerant to "keep an open mind" when it comes to God, as opposed to laying down a position, taking a stand, which has the potential in it for disagreement
- Same in Paul's day, when he came to the debating capital of the world, Athens, Greece
- Bankrupt financially today, back then they were bankrupt when it came to ideas about faith – they were everywhere but none of them were worth much

Read text: Acts 17:22-36, NLT

So Paul, standing before the council, addressed them as follows: "Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: 'To an Unknown God.' This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I'm telling you about.

- Paul is visiting a hyper-pluralistic society – one that is into everything and nothing at the same time, much like ours today
- But he decides to make the Unknown God known – the Agnosto Theo – he wants to explain to them

He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn't live in man-made temples, and human hands can't serve his needs—for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries. His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and exist. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' And since this is true, we shouldn't think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone.

- Paul starts off with what they have in common – with what it's easy to believe about God – that He is the Creator, that He is bigger than any expression of religion, that He is greater than any person, that He is in control of history and destiny, that He is near to each and every person, that He is vibrant and alive and dynamic and interactive, sustaining life
- These are all pretty hard to argue with, and they all pretty accurately reflect the spirituality of our time too, right? The “cult of Oprah”, or whatever other self-help spirituality guru you'd like to replace her name with?
- Paul is building a bridge – he's using shared vocabulary, he's starting where people are at, he's making connections with what they know, and he's establishing credibility with his audience – “hey, this guy knows his stuff” – “I like what he's saying” – “what he believes is actually pretty close to where I'm at”
- And it's an attractive and accurate picture of God all at the same time – **(go through the section)**

God overlooked people's ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead.”

- This is where Paul turns things, where he escalates the discussion – because when the word “repent” is used, well, that means there's a problem that needs fixing, that something is wrong on a personal level – it zeroes in on you and I
- And then an even tougher word to handle: “judging” – after all, who likes THAT word???
- Paul ties all of this in to the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, even if this is where his presentation is ended and he doesn't get to say the name

When they heard Paul speak about the resurrection of the dead, some laughed in contempt, but others said, “We want to hear more about this later.” That ended Paul's discussion with them, but some joined him and became believers. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the council, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

- Paul has stirred enough curiosity that there are people that are attracted to him and his message, and they become followers of Jesus

Introducing *Agnosto Theo*, the Unknown God

- Following Paul's example:
 - Building a bridge using common vocabulary, common experience, what people are into, being up on and connected to culture and media and what people are talking about
 - But then making a clear differentiation – taking things to the next level, as people are ready – and focusing in on the person, deeds and example of Jesus Christ – who was He, why did He come, why did He have to die?
- Because that's the difference, isn't it? If God is only love and nothing else – a cosmic Care Bear or mystical friend in the sky – then why would anyone ever have to die? Or rise from the dead? Seems a bit barbaric, doesn't it?
- It's much easier for people to believe in something that asks nothing of them, has no cost, and offers only endless benefit without sacrifice of anything except mental space or "spiritual energy" – where desire is all that matters and anything goes in terms of belief – where you can't be wrong and no-one will ever challenge what you say or make you think twice
- People are interested in God and spirituality and even faith – not so much religion – and that's OK, because religion is a word that probably could stand to be retired anyway – even when I hear it, I feel a like it's a negative thing – a house that people built for God, that God may or may not be occupying and may have never wanted in the first place – "Religion is what happens when God has left the building" – Bono
- The very good news is that God WANTS people to know about Him – just like Paul said – and He is doing a lot more than Christians have traditionally given Him credit for
- The truth is, the Bible is clear: no-one can come to God without God drawing them to Himself – it's not like we are starting from scratch with people, it's not like God hasn't been already working in their lives for years and years – we are there to help them take the next step, to move the process on in some way, to be a part of their journey, and sometimes, to see them take the momentous step into light and life
- And where our words, our messages are most persuasive is when we share our stories – our own "I Am Seconds" the difference: the idea of "I am second" – not just something to say, but a way of life, a series of choices that take the focus off yourself and put the focus onto Christ – difficult choices, ones that don't make you feel good but that are ultimately good FOR you – choosing discipline instead of indulgence, choosing not to sin instead of what feels or looks so good, choosing a path that is narrow instead of extremely wide
- I had one of those weeks where I had a bunch of interactions with some amazing people at different points in their spiritual journeys⁴
 - Atheists/agnostics peppering me with questions about what it means to be a Christian and how we live our lives and where the Bible fits in
 - (Talking with atheists – still questions, and still leaning towards God, towards something/someone bigger than themselves – very hard to be a true atheist in the face of all our inclinations towards God and how shot through the world is with the evidence for God, even in the middle of all the junk and hurt and evil of our world)

Key Thought:

The God who reveals Himself in the Bible continues to show people who He is today.

Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world. Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honour.

James 4:8-10, NLT

TAKE IT HOME:

The God who reveals Himself in the Bible continues to show people who He is today.

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Conclusion/Response: What is your nickname for God?

- I want to hear your name for God – either one that connects with you that is already used in the Bible (a list of some of them is up behind me) or a nickname that you would give Him, and then why – connect that name with a story from your life or a fact from your life or a situation in your life
- How do you choose? Think about your life – perhaps a key moment in your spiritual journey, or a turning point in your life, or a general life theme that you’ve seen come out
- Think about it, and then I’d like to take some time and hear some responses, as we make the “Unknown God” known

Old Testament Names of God:

- Almighty God
- The Eternal God
- The Lord our Provider
- The Lord our Healer
- The Lord our Victory/Banner
- God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob
- The Living God
- YHWH – I am who I am
- The Lord God – cosmic and personal at the same time
- God Most High
- God who sees me
- The Lord of hosts
- The Lord my shepherd
- The Lord my righteousness
- The Living God
- Father
- Spirit
- Jesus Christ, the Son of God
- Rock
- Redeemer
- Saviour
- God of _____
- The Lord my _____