

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The message of grace you are about to hear was purchased in a place exactly like the one shown in the image behind me.
- B. There is a question you have probably heard — and maybe quietly wondered yourself: don't all religions basically teach the same thing?
- C. Your colleague at work believes it. Your neighbor assumes it. Your college student is being handed it as settled fact.
- D. For many Christians, it has become the most uncomfortable question of their faith.
- E. This summer, we are starting a new series here at Pathway.
 1. It is called: **What's the Difference?**
 2. Today is Talk #1 of 12. Today's talk is called: **The Christian Map: What Is Historic Biblical Christianity?**
- F. We are going to do something many churches never do — look at the major belief systems of the world and ask one honest question: What's the difference?
- G. We will examine Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, New Age spirituality, secular humanism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, and more. Respectfully, seriously, and without mockery.
- H. Our approach:
 1. We will steelman every tradition before we critique it. A steelman argument is the opposite of a straw man argument. It means I want to present each system at its best, the way a thoughtful, sincere follower would present it.
- I. We will acknowledge what each tradition gets right — the genuine human longing it addresses, the real beauty it contains.
- J. And then we will ask: What's the difference?
- K. By the end of this series, many of you will have something you may not have had before: LANGUAGE.
 1. Clear, bold, wise, kind, confident language for the conversations you are already having.
 - a) If you are navigating a pluralistic workplace and want to hold your convictions without sounding intolerant — this series is for you.
 - b) If you are a parent and your kids are coming home with questions you cannot answer — this series is for you.
 - c) If you have ever wondered whether your faith can survive your hardest questions — stay for this.
 - d) Gifts for those who attend... but you have to attend in person to get one. Grace.
- L. Throughout this series, I want to build a case — one that historians, skeptics, and people with no theological reason to be generous have made — that...
 1. **"No movement in human history has done as much good for the world, societal, humanitarian, civilizational, and psychological good as historic biblical Christianity."**
- M. And at the end of every talk, we will arrive at the same answer. Not a system. Not a set of rules. Not a philosophy. A Person — and the one thing He offers that nothing else on earth can.
- N. But today, we start with Paul in Athens.

II. PAUL IN ATHENS — THE QUESTION (Acts 17:16–23)

- A. The year is approximately AD 50. Paul arrives in Athens — the most intellectually sophisticated city in the ancient world. Home of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. A city whose architecture still inspires awe twenty-one centuries later.
 1. *"Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols."* (Acts 17:16)
- B. In the Athens Paul enters, the religious landscape is overwhelming... Paul walks in, and his spirit is "provoked." That word in the original Greek is *paroxynō*. It's where we get our word "paroxysm." This wasn't mild irritation; it was a sharp, painful, grievous agitation. He wasn't filled with contempt at them; he was in pain for them. He sees a city that has reached the absolute heights of human achievement and still has not found the God it is desperately looking for.
- C. He doesn't stand on a corner and yell. He dialogues — the Greek word is *dialogomai*, a give-and-take of ideas, a conversation, a real Q&A. He finds out what people already believe. He looks for the open door.
- D. Paul was a scholar's scholar. A thinker, a philosopher, a student of every tradition available to him. He had spent a lifetime studying God, theology, and truth. And then, in one defining moment, everything he thought he knew was turned upside down.
- E. That was the moment he met Jesus Christ — his arch-enemy, risen from the dead.
 1. Jesus did not wait for Paul to come to him. He pursued him. Chased him down. Stopped him on a road.
 2. And Paul, the most formidable intellect in his generation, was undone — not by a better argument, but by a living Person whose cross had already purchased everything Paul owed.
 3. He found what he had been looking for. And he could never be the same again.
 4. Jesus became his north star — his everything when it came to faith, hope, meaning, logic, transcendence, truth, and life.
 5. To Paul, Jesus was...
 - a) The Creator of the cosmos.
 - b) The centerpiece of history.
 - c) The Savior of his soul, and...
 - d) The Savior of the world.
 - e) The resolution of every dilemma, and...
 - f) The hope of every longing heart.
 - (1) Paul knew this. He felt it. He lived it.
- F. And now Paul stands in this place of overwhelming religious pluralism. And when he looks beneath it — beneath the marble and the gold and the philosophy — he sees in the Athenians exactly what he had once seen in himself.
 1. Why had he been so zealous to persecute Christians?
 2. Why was he so urgent in his religion?

3. What was driving the best of the best to run so hard in the wrong direction?
 - a) The answer is the same for Paul as it was for Athens — and you can say it in one word.
 4. The human heart — many hearts, perhaps your heart — is restless. On a quest for meaning, for reality, for something that holds.
 5. There's a desperation deep inside.
 6. That restlessness is not a flaw. It is a signal. It is pointing somewhere.
 7. And nowhere is this more visible than the altar Paul finds that stops him cold. Among thousands of idols to known gods, one inscription:
 - a) *"For as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you."* (Acts 17:23)
 - G. They were so desperate. They were so afraid they had to cover all the bases. There might be a god they missed.
 - H. I think that inscription — TO THE UNKNOWN GOD — is engraved on the altar of every longing heart that has ever searched for something real and come up empty.
 - I. Paul knows exactly who that God is. And so do we.
- III. WHAT IS HISTORIC BIBLICAL CHRISTIANITY?
- A. Before we can compare anything, I need to give you a home base — and a word I will use throughout this series that is widely misunderstood: EVANGELICAL.
 - B. Evangelical is NOT the same as evangelistic.
 - C. An evangelistic group is any group that tries to get people saved — Jehovah's Witnesses are evangelistic, Mormons are evangelistic, Islam is evangelistic. Being evangelistic says nothing about your theology.
 - D. Evangelical refers to a specific theological system — equivalent to what I will also call historic biblical Christianity. I will use these terms interchangeably throughout this series.
 - E. Four unshakable convictions of historic biblical Christianity. Taken together, these four convictions are found nowhere else in the history of religion. Anywhere.
 1. REDEMPTION: PEOPLE NEED TO BE SAVED — the conviction that every person needs to be genuinely, personally, supernaturally born again through a decisive moment of faith in Jesus Christ. Not improved. Not educated. Truly, genuinely saved. "You must be born again." (John 3:7)
 2. REVELATION: THE BIBLE IS GOD'S ONLY AND FINAL WORD TO US — the Bible is the supreme, final authority for what we believe and how we live. Not tradition. Not personal experience. Not a living prophet. Scripture alone. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)
 3. MESSAGE: THE CROSS IS THE CENTERPIECE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH — the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross, coupled with his literal Resurrection, is the absolute center of the gospel and of all theology. The place where the Son of God absorbed the full weight of human sin and satisfied the justice of a holy God. Everything flows from here. "For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." (1 Corinthians 2:2)
 - a) And a core, essential part of our understanding of the cross is the idea of Substitution. Christ died in my place, as my substitute. He bore my sins, absorbed my punishment, and died my death. In theology this is called "Substitutionary Atonement," and tragically not every Christian group believes it. But evangelicals do, because Scripture is clear.
 4. MISSION: REDEMPTION UPLIFTS PEOPLE AND UPLIFTED PEOPLE UPLIFT SOCIETY — Grace transforms people, and that transformation spills into the world. Historic Biblical Christianity built hospitals, abolished slavery, invented orphanages, fought for women's rights, launched mass literacy, and planted schools on every continent. Evangelical faith gives us not only something to believe in, but a mission to serve in.
 - F. And now Paul stands in this place of overwhelming religious pluralism. And when he looks beneath it all, he sees in the Athenians exactly what he had once seen in himself: DESPERATION.
 - G. That altar to the Unknown God is the final, exhausted monument to every religion on earth.
 1. It is the perfect symbol of humanity's best effort to reach up to God.
 2. And here is the core distinction—the one sentence that defines the difference between what Paul is about to say and what that altar represents: DO vs. DONE
 - H. Every other religion says DO. Earn it. Climb higher. Become worthy. Atone for your sins. Come back when you have cleaned yourself up.
 - I. But standing before that altar of human effort, Paul introduces a God who says one revolutionary word: DONE. It is finished. The debt is paid. The door is open. Come as you are.
 - J. That is Grace. Pure, unmerited, unconditional grace. And you will not find true GRACE in any system on earth outside historic evangelical Christianity.
 1. Paul says, "The one you are desperately worshipping without even knowing His name? Let me introduce you."
- IV. ATHENS IS THE FAR COUNTRY
- A. In Luke 15, Jesus tells the parable of the Prodigal Son, a young man who demands his inheritance early, leaves his father's house, travels to a far country, goes crazy, and wastes everything. He ends up feeding pigs in a field — about as far from home as a Jewish boy could get.
 - B. And there, in the far country, he came to himself. He began to see clearly, perhaps for the first time, that the life he had built on his own terms was internally incoherent. It did not satisfy. It did not hold. It collapsed under its own weight.
 - C. Athens is the far country.
 1. The Epicureans were there: pursue pleasure, minimize pain, make peace with death. Sophisticated hedonism. But still the far country.

- a) The Stoics were there: virtue and willpower are enough; the wise man is self-sufficient. A noble attempt. But still the far country.
- b) Thousands of idols to Zeus, Athena, Apollo, Hermes — beautifully crafted, sincerely worshipped, ultimately hollow.
- c) Our city has its own version of Athens. The Epicureans are at every happy hour. The Stoics are in every self-help aisle. The idols have updated their branding, but the altar is the same.
- d) For many people, Redding CA is the far country, and they need to come home to a Father who's been waiting with arms open wide all life long.
- D. Paul told them:
 - 1. *"We ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising."* (Acts 17:29)
- E. You cannot carve your way to God. You cannot imagine, achieve, ascend, or accumulate your way to God. Every attempt is the far country — the direction is simply wrong. You are climbing, and God is not at the top of the mountain.
- F. Paul pivots.
- G. *"Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things."* (Acts 17:25, NKJV)
- H. Do you know who he's quoting right there? One of their own Cretan philosophers, Epimenides. Paul is modeling our steelman approach in real-time. He steps onto their turf, finds a fragment of truth in their own culture, and uses it as a bridge to introduce them to the God they've been missing.
 - a) The God you have been searching for... He is the One who gave you the breath you used to search for Him.
- I. Now comes the scene that changes everything. Luke 15:20 — the prodigal is still a great way off, rehearsing his apology, hoping for servant status. And his father sees him.
 - 1. *"But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him."* (Luke 15:20)
- J. This isn't just a nice story. This is the cross in miniature. This is the Gospel. On the cross, God the Father, in the person of His Son Jesus Christ, sees a broken humanity that is still "a great way off."
 - 1. And He runs. He runs to us, absorbs the full public shame of our sin into His own body, and pays the cost of our rebellion Himself.
 - 2. The restoration happens before our apology is even finished, because the cost was paid in full entirely by the One who was wronged.
- K. Here is the question that will drive every talk in this series:
 - 1. How would the religions of the world end the story of the Prodigal Son? Does their God run to embrace a sinner?
 - a) In some systems, the embrace comes after the earning.
 - b) In karma-based systems: There is no father at the road's end — only the ledger of your own actions.
 - c) In secular systems, there is no father at all, and love is only a chemistry experiment.
 - d) But in historic biblical Christianity: the father runs before the apology is finished. Restoration before performance. Cost absorbed by the one who was wronged.
 - (1) Paul is not bringing God to Athens. He is introducing Athens to the God in whom they live and breathe and have their meaning... they just don't know his name.
- L. The Unknown God was not unknown because He was far. He was unknown because His children had been living by his grace but called it coincidence or karma or fate or credited another god.
- V. A LEAGUE OF ITS OWN — WHAT GOOD ARE CHRISTIANS?
 - A. Not too long ago, a book was published with a title that stopped me cold. The first part of the title is: **Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites...**
 - B. I'm a Christian. So I have to ask — how true is that?
 - C. Are Christians really hate-filled hypocrites? If you use your own eyes, your own experience, your own honest assessment — what answer do you come up with?
 - D. I have been around Christians my whole life. The overwhelming majority are genuinely good people. They are kind. They want to do good. They are not perfect — and we do not claim to be.
 - E. Are there Christians who are judgmental, intolerant, narrow-minded? Yes. And yes. And yes.
 - F. But every group has its village idiots. Atheists have village idiots. Buddhists have village idiots. Liberals and conservatives and every category of human being has village idiots.
 - G. Village idiots do not define the group — not if you want to be fair.
 - H. Here is the rest of that book's title: **Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites — and Other Lies You've Been Told.**
 - I. The subtitle: A Sociologist Shatters Myths from the Secular and Christian Media.
 - 1. The author — a research sociologist — went through the actual data. Statistically. Mathematically. Scientifically. And he concluded:
 - a) We are not hate-filled. The evidence does not support it.
 - b) We are not hypocrites. The data do not show it.
 - c) We are not bad for society. Quite the opposite.
 - d) And we are not a movement that is shrinking and falling apart.
 - (1) Please do not believe everything you hear about historic biblical Christianity and the church. Ask for the data.
 - J. So — what good are Christians? What has this movement actually accomplished?

1. The church is the largest single supplier of healthcare and education on the planet — especially in places the rest of the world forgets. Most of it without profit.
2. Christians pioneered social work. Going back to the days of Constantine, it was the followers of Jesus who first established homes for the poor, homes for the aged, orphanages, and hospitals.
3. Christians invented child labor laws, shelters and street missions for the hungry and the poor.
4. William Wilberforce — converted to Christ in 1785 — led the charge to abolish slavery in the Western world. Did some Christians practice slavery? Sadly, yes. But it was Christians — following the relentless teaching of Scripture that every human life is sacred to God — who abolished it.
5. Schools for the deaf and the blind. Habitat for Humanity. The salvation army. The first free schools for impoverished kids, all because of Christians.
6. Christians fought cruelty against animals, led the way in the education of women, invented micro-finance for third-world enterprises, and founded Alcoholics Anonymous and Amnesty International.
 - a) If you subtract Christianity from the world — all of this disappears. In fact, it has rarely if ever appeared in any culture where evangelical Christianity has never taken root.
 - b) If you erase the church, what you are left with is mainly dictatorships, the rule of the powerful, the trampling of freedoms, and people being used and exploited by those in power.
- K. There's a researcher named Robert Woodberry from the National University of Singapore. He wanted to solve one of the great mysteries of history and sociology: why do some nations become stable democracies while neighboring nations become oppressive dictatorships?
 1. Woodberry enlisted a team of scholars. They fed massive amounts of sociological, economic, political, and historical data into computers — and ran the numbers.
 2. The conclusion was unexpected. Controversial. So unusual that Woodberry had his team verify the inputs and run everything again. The result was the same.
 - a) **The single most important factor in whether a nation became a stable, freedom-honoring, literate, educated democracy in the 1900s is having a strong influence from Bible-based, gospel-preaching missionaries in the 1800s.**
 3. This is a peer-reviewed study from 2012. Statistically speaking, if you want your country to be stable, educated, and democratic, the best thing you can do is go back 150 years and make sure that evangelical, gospel-preaching missionaries targeted your country.
- L. That is not a coincidence. That is the gospel at work. Grace received becomes grace extended. Redemption and Lift.

VI. Conclusion

- A. HIS NAME IS JESUS
- B. For the believer in Jesus in this room, the difference is GRACE. Grace is your foundation. It is the granite bedrock under your feet while the rest of the world builds on sand.
- C. This series is your mandate to plant your flag on this rock. To own with unshakeable confidence that your faith is not one option among many. Christianity stands alone. Not because you are better, but because of one unparalleled fact: only your God runs to you.
- D. But that confidence is not a trophy for your mantelpiece. It is fuel for the mission. For your mission.
- E. Paul stood in Athens and said, The one you worship in ignorance, Him, I proclaim to you.
- F. Those words came at a price none of us can imagine. He came to Athens through violence and force. Everywhere he'd been, rioters came to kill him. He literally fought demons. For him to stand in Athens, he endured beatings with rods, he'd been thrown into prison, endured an earthquake, and got kicked out of town. He fled from a rioting mob, snuck out of a city by night and finally come to Athens alone.
- G. All so he could say that one sentence: "Him I proclaim to you."
- H. In my classroom. On my team. In my workplace. With my neighbors.
- I. Him — Jesus — I proclaim to you.
- J. Will you settle for the comfort of knowing the Father ran for you, or will you let your spirit be provoked enough to run toward a world that still doesn't know His name?

VII. CLOSING PRAYER

- A. Father.
 1. We stand on the bedrock truth that You are a God who runs. You ran to us in our far country. You absorbed the cost we could never pay. And you declared over us, "DONE." For this unshakable Grace, we thank you.
 2. So now, God, do a dangerous work in us. By your Holy Spirit, shatter our satisfaction. Replace our comfort with holy conviction. Give us Paul's provoked spirit. Let us not see a pluralistic world to be navigated, but a city full of altars to an Unknown God, crying out in desperation.
 3. Raise up an army from this room. An army that sees their classroom, their office, their neighborhood as their Athens. An army willing to pay the price of proclaiming Your name in a world that hates it. An army that understands that Grace received is not a pillow, but a sword.
 4. Send us from this place not as settled saints, but as commissioned warriors, ready to say with our lives and our lips, "The One you are desperate for, the One you worship in ignorance... Him—Jesus—we proclaim to you."
 5. Ignite this church for Your glory.
 6. In the powerful, sufficient, and glorious name of Jesus Christ, the one we proclaim.
- B. Amen.