

I. Introduction

- A. I'd like to read our Scripture to get us started, and then we'll get into our topic for today.
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, NKJV).*
 2. Paul is a Christian leader. He is one of the most brilliant thinkers and writers of early Christianity, about 2,000 years ago. He is in Athens, the major city of Greece. And his spirit is provoked within him.
 3. That means he has a giant pain, a giant ache in his heart for the people of this great city. Along with that ache in his heart for the city, he feels a kind of righteous anger on the part of God.
 4. Why is Paul upset? Paul is upset because the city is given over to idols. These are statues of many different gods of many different deities. These idols line the city streets. They sit on the shelves of every home. Hundreds and hundreds of gods. Each one has power over their lives. These idols pull the strings over their health, their wealth, their fertility, and their fate. Each one needs sacrifices, worship, prayers, regular feedings, and offerings.
 5. The devil has spun such a web of lies around these people, they can't see out of it.
 6. Many gods. Many views. Many philosophies. Many contradictory positions. All coexisting peacefully in the hearts of people too blind to see that none of this makes sense, and it can't be real. The people of Athens labor under a powerful, almost hypnotic, illusion.
 7. Our topic for today is the illusion called PLURALISM.
 8. You have to understand that there is nothing new in the world. God doesn't change. Human nature doesn't change. And mankind's basic rebellion against God doesn't change.
 9. The idea that many competing and even contradictory ideas can be true at the same time isn't something new. Paul faced it 2,000 years ago in Athens and in every Gentile city he visited. And 3,000 years ago the prophet Elijah faced it when the same people who worshiped the invisible God of the Jews also thought they could worship a competing god named Baal.
 10. There is nothing new. The same devil is spinning the same web of illusions he has been spinning since he questioned God back in the garden of Eden.

B. Illusions

1. Today is part seven in our fall series called Illusions.
 - a) An illusion is something you think is true, but it isn't true.
 - b) An illusion is something you think is beautiful, but it isn't beautiful.
 - (1) The devil is a fisherman.
 - (a) First, he lures you — that's the illusion.
 - (b) Then, he hooks you — that's the painful surprise.
 - (c) Then, he eats you (cf. 2 Peter 5:8).
2. I have three questions:
 - a) What is PLURALISM?
 - b) What are some features of Pluralism?
 - c) What can we say to our pluralistic friends?

II. Three Questions About Pluralism**A. What is Pluralism?**

1. This one is tricky, because there is a good pluralism, which I want to affirm, and there's a philosophical pluralism, which I want to expose as an illusion.
 - a) Good pluralism means respectful disagreement. I don't agree with you. I don't like your views. I think you're wrong. But I respect you. And I respect your right to hold and express your views in appropriate ways, in appropriate situations.
 - b) Good pluralism says, "I defend your right to be wrong." It is the opposite of shutting down the opposition.
 - (1) These riots we see in the news that shut down opposition speakers — that's the opposite pluralism, that's fascism, which is the rule of violence, forcing people into your way of thinking.
 - c) As Christians, we stand for this good pluralism. If pluralism means diversity of opinion and thought with mutual respect and tolerance. Great! Scripture is all for that.
 - d) Even James Dobson said:
 - (1) "It is very important to understand that pluralism is part of our system. We don't all think the same thing and part of our strength is that we come from different perspectives. We have to respect one another even when we disagree with each other. There has to be a spirit of tolerance for the views of others, while also being deeply committed to the positions we hold. If we do that, I think we can coexist and learn to love each other better."
 - e) So, good pluralism is not the pluralism I want to talk about. I want to talk about another concept. Philosophical pluralism. That's the illusion. Here's what that means:
2. *Pluralism is a sophisticated system of thought arguing that no religion or world view has the right to declare itself true, right, or superior to any other view, or to judge any other view as wrong (counterfactual), because mutually contradictory ideas can be equally valid and true.*
 - a) Think of the word plural. More than one. Multiple.
 - b) Pluralism is the religion, the faith, the conviction that there are multiple truths in every category.

- c) Pluralism is the view that says it's wrong to say anything is wrong, because everything is right in some sense. There is one exception. There is one thing that is always wrong to say, which is to say that my system is right and therefore all others are wrong, because that would be a sin against the "plural." That is pluralism's unpardonable sin. Get all that?
- d) Good pluralism says, You're wrong, let's be friends.
- e) Bad pluralism says, Nobody is ever wrong, let's not think too hard about it.
- f) It's called Pluralism because multiple realities can be right, or right enough, even if they compete. Even if they contradict. Even if they are opposites of each other.

B. *What are some features of pluralism?*

1. *DOUBT: Truth is a giant question mark.*

- a) Pluralists aren't convinced anything is true. They're skeptical of everything. Skeptical of authority.
- b) Everything is question marks.
- c) And you're rude, mean, unloving, or intolerant if you state your truth with any level of certainty.
- d) For many generations, Christians and non-Christians basically have been in a tug of war over whose truth had more evidence. The Gospel versus the World. Which truth will win in the evidence game? Prove it.
- e) Today, nothing is even provable. Today, when we preach the gospel, we're immediately in trouble because we're so confident. Today's pluralists doubt that there is a truth to begin with, or that if there is truth, they're skeptical we can accurately find it. Correct and incorrect hardly matter at all. Pluralism is a faith based on doubt.

2. *PROPAGANDA: Truth is something I bend to my desires. "There are no facts, only interpretations."*

- a) Postmodernists feel that we can never be truly objective because we carry a busload of biases, cultural prejudices, and the arrogance to believe that our way is the right way.
- b) Over a century ago, philosopher Freidrich Nietzsche wrote, "There are no facts, only interpretations."
- c) So, when we say that Jesus is the way to God, a pluralist receives that—and every other claim—as just one person's interpretation.
- d) And that is where we get the common statement: "That's true for you but not true for me."
- e) *Everything* is propaganda—biased information to promote an agenda.

3. *SUBJECTIVE: Truth is something I feel inside.*

- a) For most of our daily lives, we assume that "the truth is out there." It exists in the real world outside our minds. We don't prove this, we just assume it.
- b) So an architect or engineer calculates roof trusses by referring to data outside his or her own "opinion." These are mathematical facts, and the roof can handle the snow load. Let's call this "objective truth."
- c) "Subjective truth," in contrast, is the view that truth is shaped by personal tastes, opinions, and feelings.
- d) Radical pluralists are less likely to ask, "Is it true?" and more likely to ask, "Does it feel right?"
 - (1) Christians say that if you want to find what is true, open your Bible and look outside yourself to the revelation of the Word of God. Look outside.
 - (2) Pluralists say that if you want to find what is true, look within. Launch a voyage into inner space, and find your own truth. Because everybody has their own custom truth package.
 - (3) And in case you think this is something new, I refer to you to the book of Judges in the Old Testament, Judges 17:6, from 3,500 years ago which says, "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." That is the soul of pluralism.
 - (4) But what if selling a child into prostitution feels right in some cultures, or if dumping toxins into a river feels right for some corporate CEO's? A recent survey of girls in India showed that over half believed it was okay for a husband to beat his wife. Subjectivism makes truth...
 - (a) Well, that's not true for me, and I guarantee it's not true for you either.

4. *RELATIVE: Truth is local and limited, for my time, my place, and my people.*

- a) In another time, it might not be true.
- b) In another place, it might not be true.
- c) In another culture, it might not be true.
- d) Pluralism makes truth is a moving target; it depends on people, place, and time. There are very few permanent truths—called "absolutes"—for all people, all places, and all times. That's why our postmodern friends can say that Jesus might be true for you, but not for them. It's all relative.

5. *CONTRADICTORY: Truth can contradict itself.*

- a) So a truth can be both true and false at the same time. And now, I have a splitting headache.
- b) You've seen the coexist bumper sticker? On one hand, it's a great symbol of the good kind of pluralism—an open handed tolerance and patience we should all have with those with whom we disagree.
- c) But philosophically, they simply can't all be true.
- d) Think of the contradictions you have to accept to affirm "all religions say the same thing." The fact is that all religions say mutually contradictory things; that's why there are so many of them.
 - (1) Christians teach a God who is a Trinity.
 - (2) Muslims teach one God, and say that the Trinity is an insult against God.
 - (3) The Athenians in Paul's day taught many gods.

- (4) And Hindus say all is god and god is all.
 - (a) They can't all be right. Except under pluralism. It's like taking ten thousand puzzles, taking one random piece from each box, and trying to fit them all together. The only way to do it is to cram together pieces that don't fit. And if if you do, the picture will make no sense. It is absurd. It is incoherent.
 - e) Here's a better bumper sticker: *Contradict*. They can't all be right.
- 6. Transition
 - a) And this brings us back to Athens and Paul.
- 7. Here was a city full of idols and a culture full of thinkers. The philosophies that built western civilization came from that place and that time.
- 8. Yet somehow, they are able to hold together that which cannot be held together. What does Paul say?
 - a) *Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. (Acts 17:17, NKJV)*
- 9. He reasoned with them. He didn't isolate from them. He didn't run from them. He didn't stand on the corner with signs and yell at them. He went to their marketplace, and reasoned with them. And he did this daily. He didn't just unload everything at once. He dripped it out. He made the case. He spoke to those who were willing to listen.
- 10. And he patiently, gently, and wisely made the case that there is a God in heaven, a Savior who came to earth, and a salvation gift that lasts forever.
- 11. And he delivered these truths into a culture that suffered the snake bite of pluralism, and was descending into death at breakneck speed.
- C. *What Can Christians say to our pluralistic friends?*
 - 1. *SCRIPTURE: To Pluralists in the Church: Listen to the Testimony of Christ and the Scripture.*
 - a) If you take the Bible at face value, you'll never come up with anything like universalism.
 - (1) Jesus said to him, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. (John 14:6, NKJV).*"
 - (2) Paul was respectful of the Athenians as people, though he called their religious views "ignorant" (Acts 17:16-34).
 - (3) God's prophet, Elijah, mocked the priests of the regional god, Baal and called people to choose between the True God and false gods (1 Kings 18:21-40).
 - (4) King David called gods of the other nations "demons" (Ps 106:35-37).
 - (5) St. Paul echoed David when he claimed that everybody who worships an idol is really worshipping a "demon" (an evil spirit, 1 Corinthians 10:21).
 - b) Though God's people respected their neighbors, they rejected their neighbor's religions. No matter how long you scan the Bible's horizons, you'll never find a glimmer of pluralism.
 - c) And now, to our pluralist friends in the world:
 - 2. *IMPRACTICAL: Pluralism simply doesn't work in the real world.*
 - a) It is against everything we know from science, logic, and experience. And it is against the Bible.
 - b) Jesus said: "*But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: (Matthew 7:26, NKJV).*"
 - c) There's a story of an atheist-pluralist-scientist-man who became an expert in harvesting mushrooms. If you eat the wrong mushroom, you die. So he trained under the best mushroom experts he could find (mycologists), and became an expert himself.
 - d) And one day, he realized that pluralism and mycology could never go together.
 - (1) Accepting Doubt wouldn't work, because if there were any doubt in a mushroom being edible, doubt in this case was deadly.
 - (2) Calling everything his teachers told him Propaganda, would also be deadly. The idea that everything is opinion, and there are no facts, just interpretations, is simply not going to work. In the realm of picking mushrooms, there are facts, and there is no room for interpretation.
 - (3) A subjective approach to truth wouldn't work either. He couldn't unearth a truffle and look inside to see how he felt about it. He had to know, based on external evidence, if it was edible, or deadly.
 - (4) Same thing for truth being relative. If this mushroom is deadly, it is deadly for this time and every time, for this place and every place, and for this culture and every culture.
 - (5) And the whole idea of truth being self-contradictory was out the window too. A mushroom can't be edible and not edible at the same time. It's one or the other, not both.
 - e) This atheist became a Christian. Because God can use fungi to glorify the name of Jesus.
 - f) *It might be a fun debate in a university classroom, but Pluralism is a philosophy that never works in the real world.*
 - g) Every time you walk into a building, an engineer has calculated the roof trusses. What if those engineers used pluralistic thinking?
 - (1) You just wouldn't want to be in that building during a blizzard!
 - h) Back in Chicago, I taught a Bible study on a cold, rainy Wednesday night. Afterwards, a man came up to me, dripping wet. He said, "I left my lights on and my battery is dead. Can you give me a jump?"
 - i) "Sure," I said. I have cables.

- j) So we went outside... into a cold, driving rain. There was only the light of a parking lot light.
 - k) I gave him the cables, told him to hook them up, and I ran over to my car, drove it over, and popped the hood.
 - l) I got out, he handed me my end of the jumper cables.
 - m) Before I hooked them up, I double checked. I said, "red to positive, right?" "Definitely," he said. "Red to positive."
 - n) Now, let's pause here. Is there any way that a pluralistic philosophy works in this situation? You can have all the armchair philosophical debates you want. You can come up with all the logic in the world why truths can contradict and reality is plural.
 - o) At the end of the day, it's binary. True or false. Right or wrong. Red to positive or red to negative.
 - p) The instant I touched the cable to my battery, it snapped and sparked and threw me back. I didn't swear.
 - q) I checked. Red to negative, and his *opinion* didn't make a difference. His opinion was sinking sand.
 - r) In actual practice, the only way a pluralist can live in the real world is by borrowing the Christian worldview in order to survive. Reality is the rock that God describes. Reality is the bedrock of Jesus and his Word.
3. *HEARTBREAKING: The human spirit cannot thrive in a world where truth won't stay true.*
- a) Pluralists are stuck claiming one thing in theory and living another thing in practice. This breaks their heart.
 - b) Listen to these famous atheists at the end of their days:
 - (1) Jean Paul Sartre: "I reached out for religion, I longed for it, it was the remedy... I needed a Creator." [The Words, 102]
 - (2) Albert Camus: "For anyone who is alone, without God and without a master, the weight of days is dreadful." [The Fall, 133.]
 - (3) Nietzsche: "Speak. What wilt thou, unknown-god?... Do come back with all the tortures. To the last of all that are lonely, O, come back! Oh, come back, my unknown God! My pain! My last happiness!" [Thus Spoke Zarathustra, pt 4]
 - (4) David Hume: "I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse...; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, so strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther." [A Treatise on Human Nature, 1.4.7.]
 - (5) Will Durant: "I survive morally because I retain the moral code that was taught me along with the religion, while I discarded the religion.... You and I are living on a shadow.... But what will happen to our children...? They are living on the shadow of a shadow. (Chicago Sun-Times 8/24/75 1B)
 - (6) It is said that Sartre regretted how many young people he turned to atheism. Before his death, he began visiting a Christian pastor. He wrote, "I do not feel that I am the product of chance, a speck of dust in the universe, but someone who was expected, prepared, prefigured. In short, a being whom only a Creator could put here." (National Review, 11 June, 1982, p. 677).
 - c) God designed you for truth. Jesus said to him, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. (John 14:6, NKJV).*"
 - (a) His person is truth incarnated.
 - (b) His life is truth authenticated.
 - (c) His teaching is truth communicated.
 - (d) His gospel is truth activated.
 - (e) His Church is truth propagated.
 - (f) His Kingdom is truth emancipated.
 - (2) Jesus is the truth. And he alone can satisfy the quest of every human heart.
4. *FRAGMENTED: Life can't make sense without a unifying core, and that unifying core is the Lord Jesus Christ.*
- a) Pluralism robs the world of a unifying core. It takes the things that are precious and give life meaning, and makes them all plural, as if reality is an eat what you want buffet.
 - b) What are these things that make life precious? God. Value. Truth. Life. Purpose. Love. The Gospel.
 - c) But pluralism makes them plural. It proposes an ever changing menu of...
 - (1) Gods without A God.
 - (2) Values without Value.
 - (3) Truths without Truth.
 - (4) Lives without Life.
 - (5) Purposes without Purpose. (What is the purpose of the purposes?)
 - (6) Loves without Love.
 - (7) Gospels without a Gospel of a Savior who lived and died and lived again to reconcile a sinful race to God.
5. Jesus came as a Teacher and a Prophet. He came to deliver WORDS. Those who would be loyal to him must be willing to affirm that God has revealed himself in both Jesus Christ as a person, and equally in the content and words of his teachings. To distort the shape of God's reality isn't just a mistake, it's rebellious and sinful.
6. Pluralism is flat out against the Bible. And it is the source of all the sadness and confusion and despair in our world today. *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. (Ephesians 4:4-6, NKJV).*
7. And it is him that we worship and praise.