

Coming to Know the “Unknown God”

Acts 17:22-31

Second Baptist Church, Memphis

April 27, 2008

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Raise your hand if last week you read, either in the newspaper or on the internet, the obituary of Ida Mae Russell Sills. Ida, from Memphis, died March 21. Her obituary was in the *Commercial Appeal* Sunday before last.

Apparently, it has become a growing email and internet phenomenon. The Memphis Flyer referred its readers to the *Commercial Appeal* website to read “the greatest obituary ever written.” It is still the most read item on the Commercial Appeal’s website.

Herschel Wells emailed me the other day and said I had to read this obituary. So I did.

The obituary begins with this paragraph:

IDA MAE RUSSELL SILLS began this world as Betty Jean Cherry, the daughter of Howard Cherry and Betty Thompson of Middle Tennessee. In the 1930s it was unthinkable for a child to be born to a single mother. The Thompsons contracted Georgia Tann at the Tennessee Children's Home. Georgia, now famous for selling babies, found a couple who was willing to purchase the child. Everett and Elsie Russell were chosen, who had already

adopted one high profile Memphis baby. The Russells renamed their new baby Ida Mae.

Telling about her marriage to her first husband, which ended in divorce, it says, *Ida's marriage to Karl was a three ring circus, engagement ring, wedding ring and suffering.*

The obituary goes on to tell about her second marriage:

Ida met and married Albert Sills in 1960. Ida said "I never knew what real happiness was until I got remarried, then it was too late." Ida Mae and Albert settled down in Fox Meadows area of Memphis. Albert wanted a son, Ida wanted a dog. Ida quoted "with my way we just ruin the carpet." But on March 6, 1966, a son was happily born named Lee.

Later it says:

Albert retired in 1985, Ida said "great I now get twice the husband and only half the income." Lee went off to college and Denise got married and had a son named Josh. Ida retired from Ma Bell in 1989. After a long illness, Albert passed away from Lung cancer.

The obituary was written by Ida’s son Lee. It cost him \$650 to have such a long obituary printed. Here’s my last quote from it, speaking of Ida’s death:

Ida developed a cold that progressed into pneumonia. Now Ida was a smoker. She said "to quit smoking well that's easy. I ought to know. I have done it a thousand times" but the years of smoking left Ida's lungs damaged

and beyond repair. On this Good Friday March 21, 2008, Ida Mae Russell Sills slipped away and joined her beloved daughter in Heaven. Fortunately her husband Albert preceded her and joined his mother in a much warmer climate.

Albert and his mother in a “much warmer climate.” Needless to say, according to an article in last Friday’s Commercial Appeal, some family members were not thrilled with the lengthy obituary.

Consigning people to hell is not usually an effective strategy to win people over.

I went to a large suburban public high school in north Dallas. We had a large Jewish population at my school—about 40 %. Looking back on it, I’ve always been grateful that I grew up in that kind of environment in that I learned early on about the need to be sensitive to religious differences between people—that not everyone believed exactly like me.

When I was in high school, every now and then one of my fellow Baptists would get fired up or guilted up by their church’s youth minister to get out there and “evangelize the lost” and would show up at school and corner one of their poor Jewish friends and say something about him or her going to hell. And that would stir up all kinds of teenage drama for a couple of days. It never failed; this would happen several times a school year.

I am 100 % confident that no Jewish student at J.J. Pearce High School in Richardson, Texas ever converted to Christianity in response to one of their overeager classmate’s pronouncement that they were going to hell. Quite the opposite, in fact. It always created strife and hard feelings.

Notice that is not how the Apostle Paul approached the non-Christians in Athens. Notice how he approached them. He engaged the people there with attentiveness and respect and learned from them as well as sharing his own insights. He “looked carefully” at the objects of their worship, and then affirmed the people as “religious in every way.” He acknowledged and honored them.

Paul was proclaiming the good news of Christ with respect and not domination, with a posture of hospitality not estrangement. And in that he is a model for us.

It was not a one-sided selling job or spiritual arm-twisting. His evangelism did not have canned answers. It was a friendly exchange and a positive witness.

Paul cut through to the basic matter of what they believed, what they aspired to, and what they actually needed. He went down the line with beliefs that he held in common with them. Because he started where they were, because he did not demand that they begin where he was, they listened.

[Mickey Anders]

Paul went to the Areopagus. The "Areopagus" was both a place and a group. It's a small rocky hill in Athens. Aeropagus means "Mars Hill". More importantly, the Areopagus was the most prestigious and venerable council of elders in the history of Athens, so-named because it met on that site.

By Paul's day it was a place where matters of the criminal courts, law, philosophy and politics were debated and adjudicated.

Paul, who had been publicly proclaiming the way of Jesus in the marketplaces and synagogues (Acts 17:17) with anyone and everyone, was ridiculed by these opinion makers as a "babbler" who advocated "foreign gods." But they loved to learn the latest to debate, so they invited Paul to a meeting at the Aeropagus, Athens's most powerful and important venue, to explain his "strange ideas."

["The Aeropagus Then and Now," Essay by Dan Clendenin April 25, 2005, www.journeywithjesus.net]

Notice that Paul did not withdraw from these leaders of culture. He engaged them—he engaged them on their terms, even. He did not come at them with scorn or judgment. He was attentive to their customs and beliefs. He related his faith to their own system of thought. He was respectful and learned from them as well as sharing honestly his own insights.

Paul began his remarks by complimenting them, *I see how extremely religious you are in every way.*

Athens was certainly filled with idols. Athena's huge gold and ivory idol stood in the middle of the city. Ancient scholars tell us the point of her gleaming spear was visible as much as forty miles away. Surrounding her were images of Zeus, Neptune, Apollo, Venus, Diana, and the rest of the Greek pantheon.

There were idols to the lesser gods of Olympus, to the gods of the waters, earth, and the underworld. In Athens, there was always room for a new god. All you had to do was place it alongside the others.

We are told that when Paul saw all these idols he was deeply distressed. Remember as a Jew, Paul grew up in a tradition that had seen how angry God became over idol worship. The worst judgments Israel faced in its history always came in response to worshiping before idols.

An idol is anything, or anyone, on earth in whom you trust for your salvation. Throughout the Hebrew history, there would be times when the people grew tired of looking for salvation from a God who was so demanding.

So they would turn their hearts towards the gods of wood and stone that they could fashion with their own hands. These gods promised fertility and prosperity, made little demands, and didn't care how you lived. That's the benefit of an idol. You can always tell an idol, because an idol makes promises but not demands.

Craig Barnes says that you would think that Athens, the city of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, the birthplace of classical culture, a city filled with really smart, well educated people would not worship so many idols. But in fact, just the opposite has always been true in history. The smarter we are, the more tempted we are by the illusion that we can control life and save it through the right idol.

Being smart doesn't free you from the temptation to idolatry. It just gives you the opportunity to be really creative and innovative in worshiping idols and the ability to worship many idols at the same time.

Many of us knock ourselves out at work to become successful, thinking that will be it.

But because we are smart and know life has to be more than work, we also try to be supermom or superdad.

And because we know the kids will someday leave home, we try to save for retirement.

And because we know retirement is no good if we're sick, we try to stay healthy.

And we try recreation, and education, and the market, and a bigger house, and, and, and.... None of these things are idols in themselves, unless you are expecting them to save your life, which is exactly what we tend to expect.

Since we are smart, we've learned to diversify. We've got a lot going. John Calvin wrote, "the human mind is a perpetual factory for idols." Surely, we think, one of these things will work out.

But late at night when you are lying in bed staring at the ceiling, you wonder if you're doing enough, because in spite of all you are doing, it feels like something is missing.

[Craig Barnes, "Moving Beyond the Idols," The National Presbyterian Church, April 2, 2000]

Paul noticed that the Athenians even had an idol to The Unknown God. The Unknown God was the one they created to cover their bets. It was a catch-all, in case they missed one. To worship at the altar of the Unknown God is to put your faith in what's next—the thing that must be out there that will finally solve our problems.

That may be the idol to which we are actually most devoted. It's the one we haven't yet discovered. The Unknown God is the idol for what's around the corner. The Unknown is what compels us to get a different job, a different house, a different spouse. The Unknown God is the "grass is always greener god." It says you haven't found the right thing to save you just yet. You better keep looking.

The altar to the Unknown God proves that the Athenians were like us Americans: they knew there was something more, but they just didn't know what it was.

Paul says to the intellectuals and philosophers of Athens: *When I was walking through your city looking at all the objects you worship, I found an altar with the inscription, "to an unknown."*

Then he says, *This one whom you proclaim as unknown, I have come to know. I have come to know and to love this God.*

Paul goes on proclaiming these radical ideas:

One God who made all things;

One God who has no need for shrines and sacrifices; One God who alone gives life and breath to all things.

And then he says, *For in him we live and move and have our being; For we, too, are his offspring.*

Paul is proclaiming a personal God. A God who plays an integral role in our birth, a God who lives not in a stone temple, but among the people, a God who is not far off but close at hand.

The Unknown God has become known. The unknown god has become knowable in Jesus. It was as if Paul said to them, *You have looked everywhere for God, but have not found him. God is nearer than you thought. You have looked everywhere and missed him.*

Years ago Russell Conwell told the story of a boy he knew in Massachusetts who went to Yale College and became a mining

engineer. He was a brilliant student, and during his senior year he was paid fifteen dollars a week as an assistant in his department.

When he graduated they offered him forty-five dollars a week to remain an instructor. But by that time he had gotten the gold fever and wanted to be a wealthy man, so he persuaded his widowed mother to sell the family farm in Massachusetts and go west with him in search of gold. He never found gold, and the last Conwell heard of him he was working for a copper mining company in Minnesota for fifteen dollars a week.

Not long after they sold the family farm and the boy and his mother had gone west looking for gold, the new owner of their family farm in Massachusetts was harvesting the potatoes that lay almost on the surface of the ground.

As he carried a bushel of potatoes through the narrow stone gateway, it caught on the posts, and he had to set it down and push it through. As he was doing so, his eye caught a particularly shiny stone that turned out to be a block of native silver worth more than a hundred thousand dollars.

The young man who had gone to California had passed through that gate a dozen times a day, said Conwell, and his sleeve had brushed against that very block of silver. It was almost as if it had said to him, *Here is something of enormous value right in front of you waiting for you to take it.* But he never did. He went off looking for wealth in far away places.

[thanks to Mickey Anders for this story]

In our text for today, Paul was trying to say to the Athenians, *God is not unknown, around the corner, what's next, far away. God is as near to you as that block of silver was to the young man going through the gateway, only you don't realize it. You're missing it over and over again.* He could see how close they were to discovering the presence of God.

And here many of us are, 2,000 years later, still so close to God and still desperately searching for God in all the other places.

You and I have the opportunity to live every day in the knowledge that God is present with us. It will transform our lives, and we will see that the things we want most deeply in life all lie within our reach.

The Unknown God has become known. In fact, we are his offspring.