

(Ac 17:22-30 NIV) “22 ¶ 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. 23 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. 24 “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. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. 27 God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 28 ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ 29 “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. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” (Ac 17:22-30 NIV)

As we read the context of this verse, we realize that Paul had gone to Thessalonica where he preached in Jewish synagogues. The Jews rejected Paul’s message that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. Paul told these Jews, “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,” (Acts 17:3).

He then went to Athens and he spoke to above message in Athens to pagan Greeks. He told them, “**‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’**

This is an amazing statement. He told them to change their minds about God and to accept the fact that they lived and moved in God, in Jesus Christ. Whether they accepted it or not, they belonged to God. This is an amazing statement that should be an encouragement to us all!

It means that all people, in every place on the earth, live, move and have their being in God! This is not something that we vote on; Paul told them. It is a fact of life!

Let’s think of this for a moment.

This means that Jesus is involved in everyone’s life! How can it be otherwise if in Him, **we live and move and have our being?** God is involved in everyone’s life whether they know it or not! This is an enormous claim.

This is a claim that even today, we have difficulty accepting, even in Christian circles. Jeff McSwain, is founder and Executive Director of Reality Ministries of Durham, North Carolina, a ministry that works with youth.

During the interview, he said the following which is most interesting and thought provoking:

... When we started the ministry, we actually were forced out of another organization. It's interesting because they came up with a document called "The Non-Negotiables of Gospel Proclamation," and I was asked to sign off on every detail of that document — every line, every part of the document. The interesting thing about it was that it was a document that endeavored to solve an age-old question of "how do we synthesize Arminian thinking and Five-Point Calvinist thinking?"

This organization, like many evangelical organizations who have tried to make sense of some of the scriptures that put more emphasis on God's initiative, some more emphasis on human decision, this document was a way to try to reflect as best as possible what it means to really "preach like Wesley but believe like Calvin." For many years, I thought that was the only thing that we could do—that was the best we could do was preach like Wesley and believe like Calvin (although, and I'd have to qualify that a little bit by saying I'm not sure Calvin would really want to be known as a Calvinist).

The Calvinist way of thinking is that only some people belong to God. The Arminian way of thinking is that no one really belongs to God, he is not Savior and Lord, he is not their Father until a decision is made. So an Arminian way of thinking about belonging is that "nobody belongs until a decision is made." The Five-Point Calvinist way of thinking would be more "some do belong, but only some, and Christ died for only some."

The basic belief in many circles is that not all belong to God or that we belong only after having made a decision to be included. Another major religion of this world says that we only truly belong to Him after we are baptized.

Paul is saying something very different. He is that everyone has life in Christ. This has enormous implications!

What are some of those?

The major one is that everyone is included in God.

I know this has made a major impact in my life in how I see myself and see others. When we went to Las Vegas for a few days during our recent vacations, we saw all kinds of things that we had not seen before in Moncton. We saw a big man on the street dressed as a woman, telling people what attitude they were to have and live by. He was telling them how to be happy. Some were taking pictures with him. At another place on the strip, we saw beautiful young women, dressed as workers in the sex trade, who were gladly posing for suggestive pictures with various men.

We saw poor people, both men and women, openly distributing invitations to contact prostitutes. We saw young and older people who were wasted on drugs. We saw one young person who was

very skinny, glazed eyes and very disheveled, scruffy and unkempt looking. This person was sitting with an older person whose shape was not much better.

In the past, if I am honest with myself, I would have seen myself as better than them, as having more value than them because I lived a superior life. In other words, I judged them by my values and performance level.

The reality is that I was looking at these people through my pride and very differently than the way God was and is looking at them. God loves them, just as I, with a profound love. Just as I, they do not have to work to be included in God. They already are!

In Acts 17:30, Paul told the Athenians to repent. **30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.”**

God commands us to stop holding on to our old view of Him, to change our minds about Him! He is close to everyone!

God is love. He loves you, He loves me, He loves your neighbor and He loves the person you have difficulty loving.

In Christ, everyone is included. No one is excluded!

Before Jesus died, He said the following: **“31 Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. 32 But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”**” (Joh 12:31-32 NIV)

Do we believe that Jesus can do this and will do this and has done this?

Jesus has already been lifted up. His promise – “to draw all men to Himself”!

We have read many times in past sermons that Christ has become sin for us – for all of us! We have read many times that Jesus has atoned for our sins and not only for ours but for the sins of the whole world. We have read many times that Jesus is the Savior of the world.

“And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world.” (1Jo 4:14 NIV)

We have also read many times that God reconciled the world to Himself in Christ (2 Cor 5:19).

The conclusion is that I belong, you belong and the whole world belongs to God in Christ.

This makes an enormous difference in how we live and approach God. In the following parable or short story, Jesus tells us the attitude we need we are to have when we approach God.

(Lu 18:9-14 NIV) “9 ¶ To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ 13 “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ 14 “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.””

It is so easy to be confident in our own way of living, in our own righteousness, isn't it? How easy it is to compare ourselves to other people and come out as superior when we think of our standing before God.

Jesus told this audience a very poignant and penetrating story. The first words are very telling: **“To some who were confident of their own righteousness”**

and then He tells them the evidence: **“and looked down on everybody else”**.

He then talks about how the first group thought about themselves. This is how they saw themselves as not being:

- **robbers,**
- **evildoers,**
- **adulterers**
- **—or even like this tax collector**

They trusted in how good they were. Jesus said that they trusted in themselves! They approach God through their perceived goodness.

Then Jesus gave the sharply perceptive attitude of the tax collector. He approached God in a state of dependency. He approached God with the attitude of recognizing who he was, humbly coming to God in need of God's forgiveness and acceptance. His trust was not in himself but in God.

This is what repentance is all about. It is trusting God for having done in Christ what we could never do for ourselves.

Salvation is still of faith. Jesus says that He draws all men to Himself. He also says: **(Joh 14:6 NIV) “Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.”**

Everyone is included but we cannot come to God through our righteousness, good life or commandment keeping. We come to God by believing the true reality of who we are and our dependency on Him. Satan wants us to live outside of that reality and make us think that we

are separated from God. Not accepting the reality that we are included in the living Christ is the lie which leads to sin.

When we resist that reality, we live in the realm of lies. We live outside the truth. We live in slavery to Satan's lies and deception. The Bible says that we live in darkness.

Knowing that we are free and freed in Christ gives a tremendous assurance. We can be transparent with God, able to discuss with Him the real struggles that we have. We can go before Him and have a real heart to heart conversation, knowing that in Christ, we are accepted.

We are all included in Jesus. When we struggle with weaknesses, lack of faith, or whatever it may be, we can go before God knowing that we are accepted and made righteous, made right by Jesus. Our life is hidden in His life!

(Col 3:1-3 NIV) "1 ¶ Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. 3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God."

When did we die? We died with Christ when He died! We have a new life hidden in Christ. We need to accept it. There is a good illustration in **You're Included** in an interview between Michael Fezell and Daniel Thimell discussing Karl Barth's theology. Karl Barth is a Swiss theologian, of the Reformed Tradition and who lived from May 10, 1886 to Dec 10, 1968. He had a very high view of scripture. Because of the way he understands grace, he is often accused of being a universalist, meaning that he is accused of saying that everyone will be in God's Kingdom eventually.

JMF: Barth is sometimes called a universalist. Where does that come from, and what is it based on?

DT: You often hear that charge. I imagine a person could go Google on the internet or they could go and even read some theological dictionaries and learn there that Barth's a universalist. And I can say to you with full confidence that that is simply not the case.

When I was a student at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, I was privileged to take a Barth seminar taught by none other than Geoffrey Bromiley, who was the co-editor of the *Church Dogmatics* in English who translated most of its volumes, so he knew a little bit about Barth. I chose, for my paper in his class, the topic "Is Barth a Universalist?" I went chapter and verse. I looked through all the passages I could find in the *Dogmatics* where he speaks to the subject. Barth was absolutely convinced of a universal *atonement*. Barth believed that Jesus Christ assumed the humanity of every single human being and that when he died, they died, and when he rose, they rose. He really did pay the price and win a completed salvation for them. And I think there is something in the human heart that is so used to thinking "There's something I need to do. There's a five percent or a ten percent I need to contribute. I mean,

yes, Jesus did this wonderful work on the cross and he died for my sins, but that's not quite enough."

Often, the gospel will be preached by a well-meaning evangelist in this way. They'll describe in moving terms about all that God has done in Jesus, about how Christ lived an absolutely faithful life and an upright life, and he endured the contradiction of sinners and was always upright and how he died a brutal death and how that is a substitute for our sins and he has paid it all, they'll say. But then having said this is what Jesus has done, then they will say, "now this is what you must do."

JMF: In order to get in on it.

DT: That you need to turn from sin, read your Bible, go to church. Now, of course, all of these things are enjoined upon Christians, but they're not conditions of salvation. It's not as if I have to do certain things in order to be worthy of it. I'm included in Christ because 2000 years before I was born, he lived my life and died my death and rose in triumph. And when he rose, I rose. People who are used to thinking in those kind of conditional terms don't understand it when Barth says that it's complete. So people think, "If he says it's complete and that there's nothing that I have to do in order to earn salvation, then he's a universalist." But that's not what he's saying. He's simply saying that we can't earn the salvation. It's a completed gift in Christ. But he also says, in many places in his *Church Dogmatics*, that if we deny the Lord who bought us, that if we refuse to acknowledge that in Christ God has done it all, then we can be nailed to that denial for eternity. For Barth, the sinner in hell is the ultimate insane person. He's denying reality. He's denying that Christ died for him. It isn't that the price hasn't been paid, it's that he's unwilling to accept it.

There is an illustration which has sometimes been used that I think helps clarify what Barth is saying here. There's a story that I've told that is true of the man who is convicted of murder, sentenced to life in prison. Some years later, the governor decided to commute his sentence, and so the governor issued a pardon. It said so-and-so is hereby pardoned for his crimes and may be set free from prison. This pardon was brought to this prisoner. It was already completed. There was nothing he could do to earn it, or win it—his name was already on it. But that prisoner, in fact, refused. He says, "No, I've done the crime and I'll do the time. I will not accept this pardon." Legally, he could not be forced to leave that prison even though the pardon is there for him. Hell is a monument to the person who says, "My will be done, not thine, O Lord." This is what Barth is saying.

Interestingly, after I finished that paper and turned it into Professor Bromiley, I might add that he wrote a note on that paper that it indicated a careful research of Barth typically lacking in studies on the subject. I think many people have not given Barth a fair hearing because they've heard some scare story, "Oh, he's a universalist."

The reality is that we are accepted by God the Father in Christ. In reality, the people I saw on the street of Las Vegas, in darkness, **are prodigal sons and daughters!** God loves them. They are included and they do not know it. Sharing the good news with others is to let them know of this awesome news! They can come to the Father. They are accepted and loved.

Those who trust in their righteousness can stop struggling and stop relying on their own failing goodness and accept that they are accepted in Jesus!

Once we understand this, we can live in this reality. What the world calls reality is not real. Placing our trust in God's faithful Son, trusting the Father and the Son, is true reality!

We need to ask God to open our minds by the Holy Spirit so that this truth will become more deeply imbedded, implanted and entrenched in our minds!

Satan wants to feed us the line that we are not accepted by the Father. He wants to cloud this truth. He wants to tell us that we cannot be and are not accepted because of who we are and because of our sinfulness. This is baloney, to put it in modern language!

Because we are accepted, does it mean that we willfully sin? Of course not!

My wife has won the hearts of our 2 grandsons. (She has also won my heart a long time ago!) Our grandsons listen to her. They want to spend time with her. They want to please her! Why, because, she makes them feel so special, loved and accepted!

The same is true with God. When we realize His love and acceptance for us stem from His own being and is not conditional on us, we will be drawn to Him and will want to please Him. In fact, the more we appreciate His love, (with the help of the Holy Spirit Who opens our minds), the more we will fall in love with Him, the more we will want to please Him! He desires our good! He wants a relationship with us! He wants to spend eternity with you and I!

The more this becomes reality for us (which it is), the more our desires and inclination to lead lives rebellious and contrary to His will and commands will begin to disappear. We will be transformed as we participate in what He is doing in our life and the life of others!

We have assurance! Why? Because He tells us so!

Let's live in the reality of our acceptance! We belong!

