

“Imagine . . . No Religion”: Is Religion the Problem or the Solution?

Introduction

The Text

A. Remember, Paul has now finished his third missionary journey and he’s making his way back to Jerusalem. And he knows, as he comes into the city, it’s about to get rough . . .

¹⁵ After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁶ And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we should lodge.

¹⁷ When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. ¹⁸ On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. ¹⁹ After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. ²⁰ And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, ²¹ and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. ²² What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. ²³ Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; ²⁴ take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. ²⁵ But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.” ²⁶ Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.

²⁷ When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, ²⁸ crying out, “Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.” ²⁹ For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. ³⁰ Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. ³¹ And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. ³² He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. ³³ Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done. ³⁴ Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. ³⁵ And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, ³⁶ for the mob of the people followed, crying out, “Away with him!” (Acts 21:15-36)

It's a Broken World

- A. We live in a divided and broken world. There's no sense in debating that. We all know it. We all feel it. There's so much conflict, angst, oppression.
 - 1. We see it in the news.
 - 2. But we also see it in our own lives, don't we? In our relationships, our neighborhoods, our workplaces, our city.
- B. And I think it's safe to say: We all wish it was different. It's not supposed to be this way. We wish there could be peace on earth. But instead there's a lot of strife.

Pointing Fingers

- A. It's natural, in these sorts of scenarios, to try to find something to blame. Why is it this way? Why isn't there peace?
 - 1. And do you want to know what a lot of people point their accusatory finger at? Religion.
- B. And it's not hard to understand why they might think this way:
 - 1. Isn't this part of what's at the heart of that conflict dominating our news cycle today between Israel and Iran—those of the Jewish religion and those of the Muslim religion, with their contrasting and clashing perspectives?
 - 2. Isn't this why, on a more personal level, we're told that at our family gatherings or our work parties or social events—if you wish to keep the peace, there are two things you just don't talk about: politics and religion? It'll get you fighting.
 - a. Some of us probably have rifts in our own families because of religion.
 - 3. But, of course, religion is not just creating conflict today. It's been a big source of it all throughout history.
 - a. Even many professing Christians got in the mix with the crusades and all this back in the middle ages—a crimson stain on the church for sure.
- C. So a lot of people put the blame on religion. And the thinking is that, if we really want peace in the world, we have to get rid of religion.
 - 1. This is why the famous British philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote all the way back in the 1930s: "It is possible that mankind is on the threshold of a golden age; but, if so, it will first be necessary to slay the dragon that guards the door, and this dragon is religion" (as quoted by Rebecca McLaughlin in *Confronting Christianity*, 75).
 - 2. John Lennon put this same sentiment in more popularized form some 40 years after in his song "Imagine": "Imagine there's no heaven / It's easy if you try / No hell below us / Above us, only sky / Imagine all the people / Livin' for today / Imagine there's no countries / It isn't

hard to do / Nothing to kill or die for / And no religion, too / Imagine all the people / Livin' life in peace / You may say I'm a dreamer / But I'm not the only one / I hope someday you'll join us / And the world will be as one."

- a. What's the dream? A life of peace. A world as one.
 - b. How do you get there? Get rid of religion.
- D. Now, I realize that song released over 50 years ago now, but it's message still seemingly holds captive the hearts of many in our culture today.
1. If you need evidence of this, I wonder if you realize that for 20 years now, at the New Year's Eve celebration in New York at Times Square—that big event that all the world tunes into—do you want to know what song they have some famous musician sing as the ball is dropping? "Imagine."
 - a. It's tradition.
 - b. But it's also illuminative.
 - i. This is what we still want: peace in the world.
 - ii. And this is how we still think we'll get it: no more religion.
- E. Well, believe it or not, I bring all this up because I think the text we have in front of us this morning speaks eloquently into this discussion.
1. As we turn now to consider it, I'm going to organize my thoughts under three headings: (1) Religion Is the Problem; (2) Religion Is Not the Problem; and (3) The Real Solution to the Real Problem.

(1) Religion Is the Problem

Tumult in the Temple

- A. A cursory look at this text might lead us to agree with Russell and Lennon and all those who link arms and sing along to his song every December 31st.
1. It seems like religion is the problem. It's causing the conflict, the uproar, the violence.
- B. For this, I'm looking particularly at these Jews who are coming against Paul in the temple down in [vv. 27-36](#). It's a tumultuous scene.
1. They see him in the temple there,
 2. stir up the crowd against him,
 3. lay hands on him,
 4. accuse him of wrongdoing (falsely),
 5. drag him outside the temple gates,
 6. get the whole city involved,

7. and then they proceed to beat him with their fists or whatever else they may have had in their hands at the time.
8. For, as Luke tells us there in v. 31: “they were seeking to kill him”
9. And, no doubt, they would have succeeded in the matter, were it not for the Roman soldiers who caught wind of the commotion and promptly filed out from the barracks that were there adjacent to the temple and put a stop to it, at least momentarily.
 - a. Paul was bound and led back to their headquarters.
 - b. And we’re told there in v. 35 that he actually had to be “carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd”

C. “Violence.” Why? What is the reason for all this?

1. Well, I suppose one way you might answer that question is to simply say: religion.
2. This appears to be a religious issue. That’s at least what they say. What were the accusations? What was the problem? Why were they all so incensed?
 - a. They give their reason there in v. 28: “Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.”
 - b. Luke adds this explanation in the next verse: “For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple” (v. 29).
3. But you caught it, right? He’s against our religion.
 - a. He’s against the holy people of Israel.
 - b. He teaches folks to forsake the law of Moses that God has given to us.
 - c. And he’s desecrated this holy place, the temple, by bringing a Gentile in past the court of the Gentiles where he ought not go.
4. All of this, is, when properly understood, false.
 - a. Paul is not against Israel,
 - b. nor is he against the law of Moses,
 - c. nor is it likely in the slightest that he actually would have a Gentile come with him deeper into the temple courts. He knows that would have been unnecessarily offensive and unhelpful.
 - i. Notice, they didn’t see him bring Trophimus in.
 - ii. They only saw that he was with him in the city, and “supposed” that Paul had brought him in.
5. But a lot of times, when it comes to controversies like these, the facts take a backseat to the feelings and the reflexes and the fear and the anger of it all. That’s what happens here.

- D. But, it's interesting, the essence of the issue for these Jews really is, put somewhat crudely: They don't like Gentiles.
1. We don't want you to be including them with God's people, contextualizing the law for them, welcoming them into God's house.
 2. No! This is our people, our law, our place. They don't belong here.
- E. That this is the big issue for them is made all the more plain in what comes later in [Acts 22](#).
1. There Paul is given a chance by the Roman authorities to address the Jewish crowd and make his defense, as it were.
 2. And they appear to be listening to whole of his statement and story until he comes down and mentions one thing: God's plan to include the Gentiles in his redemptive work ([v. 21](#)).
 3. Luke tells us in [vv. 22-23](#): “²² Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.’²³ And . . . they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air”
 - a. What a scene! With this word from Paul and they become something like a herd of bulls—snorting, stomping, ready to stampede.
 - b. But why? Why are they so worked up?
 - i. Because he would dare talk to them about being “sent to reach the Gentiles.” “Now we know you're a blasphemer and deserving of death.”

What about You?

- A. I wonder: Have you ever gotten stirred up over matters of religion? Have you ever spoken unkindly, angrily to a person who believed differently than you?
1. You may not have dragged them out of your house and beat them over the head—but maybe you stopped smiling at them when you passed by in the hall at the office, maybe you stopped inviting them to lunch, maybe you stopped calling them.
 2. You cut off contact in some way. After all, why would you want to hang out or associate yourself with someone who thinks that way?
 3. You might not kill them, but they're dead to you.
 4. You slam shut the gates of your heart the way these Jews slam shut the gates of the temple.
- B. Some of you may remember, a while back I was invited to debate an atheist about matters of faith, particularly concerning Jesus and whether he existed historically or not.
1. And I feel like, if I'm honest with you, I did some of this. I got a little worked up at points. I would roll my eyes or smirk a bit at him with a certain self-assured smugness.

- a. I found some of his beliefs outlandish—and, in my defense, he certainly was on many points standing well outside the stream of any legitimate scholarship I’m aware of.
 - b. But, nevertheless, he’s a person made in the image of God. And, even if his beliefs are different than mine, or dead wrong, it doesn’t give me the right to prop myself over and against him, to look down on him.
 - i. Shame on me for that.
 - ii. And shame on anyone who bears the name of Jesus and does likewise.
2. This is the very thing that makes people in our culture around say: “See, I told you! Religion, it’s not helpful. It doesn’t heal the division among us, it causes it.”

(2) Religion Is Not the Problem

The Kind of Person This World Needs

- A. But, then, just as we’re tempted to join those New Year’s Eve hopefuls and sing along—“Imagine . . . no religion!”—we discover something else in the text before us, something that throws into question our initial diagnosis.
- 1. Is religion the problem?
 - a. When we look at these Jews and we would be inclined to think so.
 - b. But then, when we look at Paul, we see something else entirely . . .
- B. Is Paul religious?
- 1. You better believe he is—radically so. He’s what today we might call a “Bible-thumper,” a “Jesus freak,” a “religious fanatic.” His whole life is consumed with his faith.
 - a. And yet—and here’s the critical point—it doesn’t seem to have made him more divisive and angry and contentious.
 - b. No, it’s made him more kind, and humble, flexible, ready and willing to hang out with anyone, and serve them.
 - i. In other words, it’s made him just the kind of person this world needs, if we truly want peace.

Where Do I See This?

- A. Where do I see this? Well, just look at the way that Paul relates to and cares for both Jew and Gentile in our text . . .
- B. First, for the Jews, when Paul comes rolling into town, and he’s there with James and the elders of the church in Jerusalem, they tell him that those among the Jews who have become believers in Jesus, they’re a little apprehensive about him.

1. Look at vv. 20b-21: “²⁰ They are all zealous for the law,²¹ and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.”
 - a. In other words: These Jewish believers are worried you’re saying it’s wrong to follow Moses in any way now. We know that’s not what you’re saying, but will you reassure them? Will go out of your way to do some things you might otherwise not need to do or want to do? Would you give up a little bit of your freedom in this instance to serve them?
 - b. We’ve got some brothers who have taken a vow (probably the Nazarite vow [cf. Num. 6:1-21]). Would you assist them in that, help pay for their offering in the temple, participate in some of these Jewish traditions so people can see:
 - i. Just because you teach that Jesus fulfills the law doesn’t mean you think we must forsake it;
 - ii. just because you teach that we are free from the law for justification, doesn’t mean that you are against people carrying on some Jewish tradition and culture properly re-contextualized in the gospel.
 - (1) These things may not be required for salvation, but they are still significant to our culture.
2. I could imagine a scenario where Paul pushes back, where he gets defensive. Where he says: “No, I’m not going to do that. Why would I do that? I’m free. I’m a Christian now fundamentally. I don’t have to trouble myself with Jewish culture anymore. I don’t have to do purity rituals or any of this stuff. I don’t care what you think.”
 - a. He could use his religion and faith in Christ to divide from them.
 - b. But instead, his faith motivates him to show consideration, to flex and serve.
 - i. He’s not compromising the truth or his convictions,
 - ii. but he is showing compassion for those who operate a little differently from him on secondary matters. “It’s okay, I can meet you in that.”
- C. But, then, for the Gentiles, we see that Paul in a similar manner goes out of his way, at great cost to himself, to reach and care for them.
 1. For one thing, in many ways, that’s what his missionary journeys have been about.
 - a. That’s why, in v. 19, we see that this seems to be the first thing he wants to talk about with James and these elders: “After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.”
 - i. Though Paul himself is a Jew, he is not in any form or fashion like those Jews we just saw in the temple.
 - ii. He’s ecstatic that the Gentiles are being reached with the gospel, that God is folding them into his holy people.

2. Beyond this, we saw in [v. 29](#), that Paul was happy to hang with Gentiles, guys like “[Trophimus the Ephesian](#)”—even if it meant his fellow Jews might get the wrong idea or hate on him for it . . . which they do (remember, it was his association with Trophimus that caused the whole uproar against him). He doesn’t care. He’s going to love this guy.
 - a. His heart was open to both Jew and Gentile.
 - b. He was willing to flex and care for both in the ways they needed it.
- D. Another simple illustration of this is his use of language. Just beyond the boundary of our text we see it . . .
1. In [v. 37](#), when he’s brought into the barracks, he speaks to the tribune, the leader of these soldiers, in the language this man could understand: “[Greek](#).”
 2. But then, a few verses later, in [v. 40](#), when he proceeds to go from there and address the Jewish people, he speaks to them in their native language: “[Hebrew](#).”
 - a. It’s a picture of the cultural sensibility and personal flexibility of this religious man.
 - i. He wasn’t oppressive or imperialistic.
 - ii. He made himself a servant, he met them where they were at (cf. [1 Cor. 9:19-23](#)).
- E. And, of course, perhaps the sweetest example I could give of this is to remind you why Paul was traveling to Jerusalem in the first place—even though, as he said, he knew suffering and rejection were waiting for him here. Do you remember?
1. He wasn’t just on vacation.
 2. He wasn’t looking for a good time with his old crew.
 3. The whole trip was motivated by a desire to bring a financial offering to the needy saints there in Jerusalem ([Acts 24:17](#); cf. [Rom. 15:22-29](#); [1 Cor. 16:1-4](#); [2 Cor. 8-9](#)).
 - a. He had gathered this collection from the Gentile believers in the churches he’d planted so he could give it to the Jewish believers that were in need here in Jerusalem. It’s an incredible thing.
 - i. Jewish believers like Paul are going to reach the Gentiles with the gospel.
 - ii. And Gentile believers—guys like Trophimus ([Acts 20:4](#))—are sending funds to support Jewish believers.
 - b. This religion hasn’t created more division, oppression, self-righteousness. No! It’s established a profound unity and peace.
 - c. Wounds aren’t being inflicted or widened, they’re being healed!
- F. So what are we to make of this? What accounts for the difference between religion as we considered it with those Jews, and religion as we see it here with Paul in particular?

(3) The Real Solution to the Real Problem

The Jews and Their Drifting Hearts

- A. Ironically, I think the real problem with the Jews in our text isn't that they have religion, it's that their religion doesn't go deep enough. It's too superficial.
 - 1. In other words, there's a problem beneath the problem of religion.
 - 2. We handle our religion inappropriately because something's off in our hearts. There's a deeper issue in play here.

- B. It has to do with where we're looking to find our significance and worth and identity.
 - 1. We're supposed to find those things in God.
 - 2. But, because of our fallen nature, there's this drift in our hearts. And we end up taking other things into the core of our being and saying: "This! This is how I know I'm special, this is how I know I'm worth it, this is how I know I'm good."

- C. For these Jews, it's a subtle shift, perhaps, but they start turning from God towards their Jewishness—our people, our law, our traditions, our place.

- D. And part of what happens when we try to find our significance and worth and identity in this way—apart from God and his grace—is we inevitably need other people to look down our nose at.
 - 1. This is where division and oppression start to come in.
 - a. How can I know I'm in unless there are others who are out?
 - b. How can I know I'm chosen unless there are others who are rejected?
 - c. How can I know I'm good unless there are others who are bad?
 - d. How can I know I'm right unless there are others who are wrong?
 - 2. So it creates an us-versus-them dynamic.
 - a. We've got to puff ourselves up and tear others down: "This is how I know I'm significant, I matter, I'm worth something. I'm not like them."
 - 3. That's why when Paul comes in talking about God embracing the Gentiles, they lose it.
 - a. He's threatening the very center of their identity.
 - b. He's endangering the very thing that gives them value and meaning in life.
 - i. It wasn't God and his grace. If they were finding their worth in God and his grace, they wouldn't have recoiled at this idea. They would have rejoiced (cf. [Acts 21:20](#)).
 - ii. But they weren't finding their worth there. They were finding it in their own superficial, self-centered, reductionistic version of religion.

You and I and Our Many Sticks

- A. But, listen, this superficial approach to religion is just one way we try to find significance and worth apart from God and his grace.
1. We can take up almost anything and use it as a stick to prop ourselves up and beat others down.
 2. Whatever else you take into the core of your being and say “this is how I know I’m significant, I matter, I’m good”—inevitably that thing will become a source of division and strife.
 - a. Oh sure, it will offer you some sense of community with those who think like you, value the same things, etc.
 - b. But it will also turn you against others who don’t.
- B. So if you start to link your identity and meaning in life with one political party or the other, you will very quickly be using that as a stick, not just to prop your tribe up, but to beat the other guys down.
1. “How could they follow such terrible leaders? How could they vote for such irrational things? How could they be such sheep?”
- C. If your work, your career, is how you know you matter, then you may grow closer to your team, but you’ll start to cut down those you’re in competition with.
1. Their success will be a threat to you. And you can’t have that. “If I lose my job I lose my life.”
- D. I referenced the words of Bertrand Russell earlier, saying that if we could just slay the dragon of religion we could usher in the golden age.
1. But what I didn’t mention was he thought we could usher in the golden age through what he called “[scientific cooperation](#).” He thought science not religion would usher this in!
 2. But, do you know what? Just three years after he would pen those words, Adolf Hitler would rise to power and do you know what he would do? Use science to destroy and divide even further.
 - a. So in [Mein Kampf](#), using science and evolutionary ideas to bolster his racist ideology, he writes: “If Nature does not wish that weaker individuals should mate with the stronger, she wishes even less that a superior race should intermingle with an inferior one; because in such a case all her efforts, throughout hundreds of thousands of years, to establish an evolutionary higher stage of being, may thus be rendered futile. . . . The stronger must dominate and not mate with the weaker, which would signify the sacrifice of its own higher nature. Only the born weakling can look upon this principle as cruel, and if he does so it is merely because he is of a feebler nature and narrower mind” (as quoted by Rebecca McLaughlin in [Confronting Christianity](#), 87).

E. Anything can be a stick, don't you see?

1. Your politics, your work, your science, your race, your culture, your wealth, your class, your education, your parenting style, your looks, and on it goes.
2. It's not mere religion that's causing the problem. It's the human heart.

Paul and His Savior's Cross

A. So how do you fix things there?

1. Well, again, ironically, religion. But not just any religion. Paul's religion.

B. Do you want to know what makes him so different from these other Jews? Where does he find his significance and worth and identity? What is it that he's taken into the center of his being?

1. It isn't any of this other stuff. It's Jesus.
2. It isn't a stick. It's the cross.
 - a. That's what's transformed him—from the inside out.

C. He's going to say this explicitly in the next chapter when he's giving his defense.

1. I was a religious zealot but I didn't get it, I didn't have the real thing. It didn't go deep enough. I was persecutor of the church, doing the Pharisee self-righteous thing, I was Jesus' enemy.
2. But then he showed up and loved me, forgave me, saved me. And it changed me.
 - a. Now I don't have to do the whole us-versus-them thing. I don't need to cut you down to know I matter.
 - b. He was cut down for me on that cross, because he wanted me close, because he valued me. What else do I need?

D. You take that into the center of your being and it makes you a different kind of person. It makes you like Jesus. I wonder if you noticed, Paul's life is clearly patterned after his Savior here:

1. Jesus was despised by the Jews for his willingness to associate with tax collectors and sinners and Gentiles ([Luke 4:28-29](#); [5:30](#); cf. [Acts 21:29](#)).
2. Jesus was falsely accused by them as having spoken against the temple ([Matt. 26:59-61](#); cf. [Acts 21:28](#)).
3. Jesus was bound and handed over by them to the Romans ([Matt. 27:1-2](#); cf. [Acts 21:33](#)).
4. Jesus was beaten and victimized ([Luke 22:63-65](#); cf. [Acts 21:31-32](#)).
5. Jesus was set up before a crowd of his own countrymen crying "Away with him, away with him, crucify him!" ([John 19:15](#); cf. [Acts 21:36](#)).
6. And Jesus still loved and prayed and cared for these folks, no matter how hard it got for him.

E. What's the point? If you want to be this kind of person, like Paul, you've got to have this kind of religion, relationship with God.

1. Jesus and the gospel—this is the one thing that, if you truly take it to the center of your life, it won't make you oppressive or imperialistic or judgmental.
2. Instead, it'll make you compassionate, kind, self-sacrificial.

F. If you get the gospel . . .

1. On the one hand, you'll no longer feel like you need to prop yourself up, prove you're worth, show you're value. You know you're loved. You know you're valued. That's what the cross tells you.
2. But, on the other hand, neither will you feel the need to look down your nose at others and tear people to the floor. You know you're no better. You're loved and saved by grace just like they can be.
 - a. The cross comforts you and crushes you at the same time.
 - b. And do you want to know what else it does? It makes you the kind of person this world so desperately needs.

G. So . . . if we want peace in this place, if we want more unity in this world . . .

1. You don't get rid of religion.
2. You get the real thing—in Jesus.
 - a. Imagine that!