

## Tuesday Lunchtime Bible Studies

*What St. Paul Really Said, by N. T. Wright*

### Chapter 5 – Good News for the Pagans

- ❖ Pagans
  - Those who are neither Jews nor Christians
  - Connotes their “developed worldview, in which religion and politics, superstition and magic, hope and fear, and sometimes ethics and morals, cluster together in a bewildering range of symbols and stories, developed over many centuries and involving quite diverse cultures.”
- ❖ Direction and confrontation
  - The *direction* of Paul’s message was *confrontation* with the pagan worldviews, undermining them and replacing them with the Jewish worldview, reworked around Jesus.
- ❖ Polemical engagement
  - How does Paul go about this confrontation with the pagan worldviews?
    - By “taking every thought captive to Christ” (2 Cor 10:5.)
  - Paul works within the pagan worldview, engaging their beliefs and practices.
    - His Athens speech is a great example – Acts 17. But so is much of 1 Corinthians.
    - For Paul, there is no part of the world that is not in the game.
  - Paul’s confrontation was sharp – some things are true and others are not.
    - But all the pagan world could be redeemed; all was part of God’s good, though distorted, creation.
  - This is the heart of Judaism.
    - The purpose of God’s great rescue project, which placed the Jews at the center, was the redemption of all the world. All the families of the earth are to be blessed through Abraham.
  - But Israel, by rejecting Jesus, risks placing herself among all the rest of the nations. Extreme zeal has had the opposite of its intended effect.
- ❖ The Challenge: Reality (the Gospel) and the Parody (paganism)
  - God and creation
    - There is one God who created everything and it is all good.
    - The created order is not divine.
  - Cult and religion
    - The cross and the Lord’s Supper are the truth. The countless pagan rituals are all no more than shadowy signposts to the truth. They are parodies, sometimes wicked ones, of the real thing.
  - Power and empire

- Jesus is Lord, not Caesar. Thus, Paul cannot avoid a confrontation with the emperor cult, the “imperial ideology.”
- The powers of this world are confronted with the one who is the true Lord of all.
- True humanness
  - What is the genuinely human way of life?
    - It is the way of Jesus, the most human of humans.
    - Paganism is a self-destructive mode of being human.
- The true story of the world
  - Paul provides the pagans with the true story of our origins and the answers to the most basic of questions. It is all going somewhere – to the restoration of justice and the renewal of all things.
  - See 1 Corinthians 15:3-8
    - Not helpful advice on living, nor a philosophical doctrine
    - Paul’s message was a set of truth claims about what happened within history.
- Philosophy and metaphysics
  - Paul’s message confronted the major philosophies of the day: Stoicism, Epicureanism, and the Skeptics.
- ❖ Conclusion
  - Saul of Tarsus is now Paul the Apostle.
    - Rather than using violence, Paul is proclaiming a message of truth to the world and to his fellow Jews.
    - The Scriptural prophecies have come true, in Jesus . . . already. The Great Act of God for which Saul was waiting (and trying to hurry along) has happened in Jesus.

Here’s a question for us. What is the direction of our message today? With whom and what does this lead to confrontation? Is confrontation with the powers and ideologies of this world still the Christian message? If so, how is this confrontation to be conducted?