

*Jesus, in particular*  
Acts 17:21-34  
Sermon by Mark Schloneger  
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My scripture comes from Acts chapter 17, verses 21 through 34.  
Before I read it, though, I want to give you a little context on what's been happening,  
So, "Previously, in Acts . . . , "  
Paul, Silas, and Timothy, have been on the road  
traveling through what is now modern-day Turkey and Greece.  
When they get into Greece, it's a whole new territory for them –  
Paul has not preached here before, and it's rough going.

In city after city, they go to the synagogues, for the most part,  
and then they open the scriptures to explain  
that the promised Messiah was to suffer, die, and rise again.  
They proclaim how this prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus.  
This message is accepted by a great many people, both Jews and Greeks.  
But they get thrown in prison and beaten, they incite riots,  
and they have to leave several cities for their own and others' safety.  
This is how Paul winds up in Athens, alone.  
Throughout ancient Greece and continuing in the Roman Empire,  
Athens was a city known for its culture;  
a city of beauty-- wide streets, white marble columns, red tile roofs,  
a city of poets and artists and philosophers,  
a city with a great university where people from across  
the Roman Empire came to study.

When Paul gets there, he begins debating with some philosophers  
and eventually gets invited to talk at the Areopagus,  
a prestigious venue where city elders met to discuss matters  
of law, philosophy and politics.  
Essentially, this is the ancient world's equivalent of a TED talk,  
and this is what Paul said,  
Acts 17, verses 21 through 34,  
I love how Luke introduces Paul's TED talk.

*Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there  
would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.*

*Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said,  
"Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.  
For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship,  
I found among them an altar with the inscription,  
'To an unknown god.'  
What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.  
The God who made the world and everything in it,  
who is Lord of heaven and earth,*

*does not live in shrines made by human hands,  
and is not served by human hands, as though God needed anything,  
since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.  
From one ancestor, God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth,  
and allotted the times of their existence  
and the boundaries of the places where they would live,  
so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—  
though indeed God is not far from each one of us.  
For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’;  
as even some of your own poets have said,  
‘For we too are his offspring.’*

*Since we are God’s offspring,  
we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone,  
an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.  
While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance,  
God commands all people everywhere to repent,  
because he has fixed a day on which the world will be judged in righteousness  
by a man whom he has appointed,  
and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”*

*When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed;  
but others said, “We will hear you again about this.”  
At that point Paul left them.  
But some of them joined him and became believers,  
including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris,  
and others with them. (Acts 17:21-34)*

In God we trust.

Since 1956, that’s been the official national motto of the United States,  
and it’s required by law to appear on all coin and paper currency.

In God we trust.

Those words are meant to say something about the history of this nation,  
about what its people believe and hold dear.

But do you know why our national motto, “In God We Trust”,  
does not violate the constitutional requirement of the separation of church and state?

Let me read straight from a 2010 decision of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals,  
*Newdow v. LeFevre*, a decision that cites an earlier case  
and is consistent with other courts that have addressed the matter.

The court said this:

*“It is quite obvious that the national motto and the slogan on coinage and currency  
‘In God We Trust’ has nothing whatsoever to do with the establishment of religion.  
Its use is of a patriotic or ceremonial character  
and bears no true resemblance to a governmental sponsorship of a religious exercise  
. . . [the national motto] has no theological or ritualistic impact.”<sup>i</sup>*

Did you get that?

According to the courts, the only reason why “In God We Trust”

does not violate the First Amendment is because it is of a patriotic or ceremonial character and has no theological or ritualistic impact whatsoever.

In other words, without further explanation,  
those words are like that altar that Paul found in Athens,  
the one with the inscription, "To an unknown God."

In God we trust is vague enough, abstract enough to be printed on your coins,  
because they speak of a God that almost everyone can accept:  
a god that promises much but asks nothing;  
a god that makes for a good backup policy in case everything else fails;  
a god that is a patriot and supports our national interests;  
a god who asks for acts of charity and not acts of justice;  
a god who blesses and baptizes everything you already value and believe.

A god like that may be etched onto your coins but does not live in your heart.  
A god like that is not Lord of your life.

I can imagine Paul visiting our country,  
picking up one of our coins, and saying,  
"Americans, I see how extremely religious you are in every way,  
for all of your money is inscribed with "In God we trust."  
But do you know the God you so readily invoke?

This I proclaim to you:  
the God you can trust is not some vague notion of a supreme being – No!  
This is the God who made the world and everything in it – the Creator God,  
the God who is ruler of heaven and earth – the Lord God,  
the God who gives everyone life and breath and everything else – the Sustainer God,  
the God who set the times and the places of people and nations– the Sovereign God,  
the God who desires people to seek him, to reach out for him, and to find him – the Loving God.

This God is not unknown, not abstract, not ambiguous,  
God is not merely a patriotic or ceremonial figure.  
No, God calls all people to repent,  
appointing one man to bring justice to this world  
and the proof is that God raised him from the dead."

In God we trust?  
To Christians, these aren't vague, content-empty, ceremonial, and patriotic words.  
No, we believe in the God who wept at his friend's grave,  
the God who healed the sick and ate with the outcasts,  
the God who took delight in children and offered forgiveness to sinners,  
the God who fed the multitudes and healed the sick,  
the God who welcomed everyone into his midst and accepted what they were ready to  
give,  
the God who rode to Jerusalem in tears, denounced the Temple, died on a Roman cross,  
and three days later walked out of the tomb with the message of resurrection,  
the God who reigns from above and from within,  
and is still present with his followers through the Holy Spirit.

This is the God we believe in.

We believe in Jesus Christ.

You know, there is another motto inscribed on our coins,  
*E Pluribus Unum,*  
“Out of Many, One.”

As Christians, this too has a specific meaning.

The church is the holy nation that crosses all human-made boundaries and borders  
and is bound together by a living faith in Jesus.

Out of many, one.

The most distinctive mark of Christ’s love, the love of God,  
is the willingness to give his own life for the sake of others.

In this time of a pandemic, in the name of Jesus,  
how are you giving of yourself for the sake of another?

In the name of Jesus, how are we, as a congregation, giving of ourselves for the sake of our  
community?

Let’s not settle for ambiguity.

Let’s not settle for less.

Let’s choose to live our particular lives in our particular location in service of our particular God.  
In the words that keep reverberating in my head:

The world cannot know of its brokenness and hopelessness  
unless a people exist who show an alternative way of life.

The world cannot know that there is an alternative to violence, to war,  
unless a people exist who proclaim that alternative and practice it.

The world cannot know that the weak and the vulnerable are cared for by God,  
unless there is a people who care for the weak and the vulnerable,  
a people who are willing to wear these uncomfortable masks that fog up our glasses,  
not because they protect them, but because they protect others.

The world cannot know that the race to consume and acquire  
is not the way God intended human beings to live  
unless there is a people that keeps the Sabbath and practices simplicity as a discipline.

The world cannot know that freedom is not a right  
that is granted by nations or defended with guns and weapons of war;  
no, freedom is given by God, and it comes with a cost that looks like a cross.

It comes through Jesus.

*For no one can lay any foundation other  
than the one that has been laid;  
that foundation is Jesus Christ.*

*Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple  
and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst? (1 Corinthians 3:11, 16)*

In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior,  
in God we trust,  
e pluribus unum.

In the One, may the many come,  
and may the many become one.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> *Newdow v. LeFevre*, 598 F.3d 638, 644 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir., 2010).