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ALIENS

In July, Roswell, New Mexico, celebrated their annual UFO Alien Festival to commemorate the purported 1947 crash landing of an extraterrestrial alien. (Funny, but in the 50's and 60's nobody talked about the incident; at least not above a whisper.) Just 25 miles south, Artesia was in the news because the U.S. Border Patrol training facility was converted into a holding area for hundreds of illegal aliens to the United States, awaiting deportation back to places in Central America. July of 2014 was a big month for talk of aliens in New Mexico. Not all of that talk was favorable to aliens; yet we have all been aliens.

Some Native Americans make a big deal of pointing out that most Americans were at one time aliens to this land. Paul, however, says we were aliens in a different way.

And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight. (Col 1:21-22)

Anyone who is subject to "wicked works" (sin) is an alien to the kingdom of God. What does that mean? Just as anyone who is not a citizen of the United States is an alien to that country, being an alien through sin means we were not citizens of God's kingdom. We did not have the rights and privileges of that kingdom, including the privilege of forgiveness of sin. We had no right to an inheritance for eternity in heaven.

Now, for most people in the world, being an alien to the United States is no big deal. Most people would choose to stay where they live, even under difficult circumstances. Some, especially those in dire straits, choose to try to change their residence, but most are content to stay where they are. After all, even we in the United States are alien to other countries, but we don't see that as a disadvantage. The problem with being alienated from God is that one country may not be as good as another. In the spiritual world there are really only two choices: in Christ or out of Christ, in extreme poverty of the soul or in wealth. Some may choose to stay in the poverty of sin. Most who recognize it as true poverty would choose to come to the wealth.

There are two choices for coming to the United States. A few come legally, immigrating in the approved

(though sometimes time-consuming) manner. Among all the news stories in July, there was also one about hundreds of people receiving their citizenship in one day. But there were also the illegal aliens; those who chose to try to enter the country illegally. Some in the United States proposed amnesty, letting them enter even though they showed a disregard for the laws of the country. Others argued for deportation unless they entered legally.

There are likewise two choices for entering the kingdom of God. Jesus spoke of an illegal way. "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. I am the door." (Jn 10:1, 9) The illegal way includes those who say that there are many roads to heaven. It includes those who say that Jesus was a good man, even a prophet, but was not the Messiah, the son of God. It includes those who say that all you have to do is say a particular prayer and you will be saved. It includes those who say all you have to do is be a good person, and surely God will save you. It includes those who think they can earn salvation on their own merit. There are many illegal border crossings, all of which will get one deported from the kingdom.

There is also a legal way. Just as with the mass swearing in of new citizens of the United States on July 4, there has been a mass swearing in of new citizens to the kingdom. "Then they that gladly received his word were immersed: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls." (Acts 2:41) Likewise, many enter legally every day. We were aliens in our wickedness, but those of us who have joined in the burial and resurrection of Christ (Rom 6) have become citizens, legally, of God's kingdom, with all the rights and privileges which pertain.

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A TALE OF TWO CITIES

The distance from the highest point in the contiguous United States (Mt. Whitney) to the lowest point (Death Valley) is about 84 miles. The distance from the intellectual high point of ancient Greece to one of its low points is a little more than half that. Athens and Corinth may have been the most opposite of cities, and they are only 44 miles apart. It is little wonder that Paul spent time in both cities. What may be a wonder is the reactions to Paul's teaching in each city. It might not be what some would expect.

Athens

Athens was the intellectual capital of the world. By the time Paul arrived it had lost its status as the political center, but it retained its status as the virtual center of the known civilized world.

Greece was not always Greece. In its earliest existence it was a loose confederation of city-states, of which Athens was one. At one time, Athens was the most powerful of these independent governments. The Athenians developed a democratic system of government.

Athens was one of the places you had to go if you wanted to be anybody.

During a period of peace they excelled in the areas of philosophy, drama, and the visual arts. This "golden age" still stands as one of the most productive in these areas until the Renaissance. It was also during this time that Athens began to excel in military might, as well. This was the period of the Persian Wars, and the great victory at Marathon.

Truth be told, what would become the Greeks were often more at battle with each other than anyone else. This was not more true than the conflicts between Athens and Sparta that became the Peloponnesian Wars. At one point Athens was defeated and Corinth demanded the total destruction of the city, but Sparta refused. Nevertheless, Athens never fully regained its political power. Indeed, Sparta also lost influence, while Corinth gained.

The great conqueror of the world was not even Greek, but Macedonian. Athens did not prosper under Alexander. Then came the Romans. Still, Greek was the universal language of the Mediterranean area. Athens retained its status as the center of learning, despite significant competition from Alexandria.

In the Roman world, Athens was a small city. The big four were Rome, Ephesus, Antioch, and Alexandria. Perhaps this was due to the Greek idea that once a city reached a certain size it outgrew itself and had to send part of its population elsewhere. Nevertheless, Athens was still one of the places you had to go if you were anybody, or wanted to be anybody. So Paul came to Athens.

He was waiting for his friends to join him, so he wandered the city. Paul was not immune to being a tourist, even though he had spent time in two of the largest cities in the world. As he wandered the city, he saw many monuments to the Greek gods.

Now, some Jewish scholars with whom he had grown up might have taken the route that some Christians today take; he could have polemicized against idolatry and told the Athenians they were all going to hell. Instead, when the leading aesthetes asked him to speak to them he started by praising them for their religiosity. "Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious." (Acts 17:22) He went on from there to teach them about "the unknown god," who was really the God of creation. Luke summarizes his sermon.

God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring. Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device. And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead. (Acts 17:24-31)

To the Athenians who were the inventors of rhetoric, this was a masterful speech. It builds from an identification of who God is, through what he has done, to what he expects. The speech had but one flaw; the word *Anastasia*, resurrection. He held his audience until that point, and then they began to argue whether what he said was believable. Some mocked, some put off judgement,

and a few believed. Paul's reception in Athens could, at best, be called mixed. Indeed, we hear very little about the Athenian church in the rest of scripture.

Corinth

Corinth had its golden age as well. It was one of the first places to use silver coins. It had developed Corinthian architecture, which was the most decorative of the three classes of Greek building. It had invented the trireme, a warship with three rows of oars, which became the dominant galley of the Mediterranean even into the Roman period. Corinth was one of the first city-states to throw off the power of the priests and establish a secular government.

Despite its strategic location on the isthmus between Peloponnesus and Achaia (the two principle divisions of what is now Greece), and despite its power in the Peloponnesian wars, Corinth did not fare well under the Macedonians and the Romans. In fact, the city was totally destroyed in about 146 BC. It ceased to exist entirely until Gaius Julius (Caesar) rebuilt it in the year in which he was assassinated. Over the next fifty years it regained much of its former glory.

In Paul's time Corinth was really a very young city, in contrast to very old Athens. By the time of his visit, Corinth had become one of the richest cities in the Empire. Because of its location it was a center of trade. As the shortest point between the Adriatic and Aegean Seas, it held a status now experienced by Suez or Panama. It was the shortest trade route, and therefore became a wealthy city.

As a center of trade, however, Corinth did not enjoy the intellectual benefits of Athens. Instead it became like many port cities, a center of vice and depravity. Trade means sailors, and sailors have to have their prostitutes and alcohol. The port of Corinth was noted for its "fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, effeminate, men who sleep with other men, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, and extortioners." (1 Cor 6:9-10)

Paul apparently spent only a few days in Athens, but this was a city in which he spent over a year and a half. (Acts 18:11) That is probably because he could not reach the Athenian mind, even with his superior logic, but Corinth was fertile soil. Perhaps because it contained sinners who knew they were sinners he was able to teach God's word more effectively.

We have no record that Paul ever wrote to the church in Athens. The Athenian letter, if there ever was one, is long lost. In contrast, we have preserved two of the possibly four letters Paul wrote to the Corinthians. (If he wrote four, then 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians are probably actually 2 and 4 Corinthians.) Tarsus was where he was born and Jerusalem was where he was schooled. Antioch was his home base, and Ephesus was a favorite city. But Corinth also held an extra special place in his heart. Just reading the Corinthian letters reveals a depth of

feeling Paul shows for no other group of people. He shows love and gratitude to the Philippians, but his worry and his care are for the church at Corinth.

The church at Corinth had problems with those outside the church. The church at Corinth had problems within the church. The letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor in the Revelation reveal some very real issues; nevertheless, Corinth is known today as the most dysfunctional of the churches of the first century. Perhaps it was that dysfunction that caused Paul to write more frequently when he had left the city. Perhaps, though, it is just that dysfunction that drew the Corinthian church closer to Paul's heart. It is easy to like a congregation that seems to have no problems; it is easier to love a congregation that seems to be more in need of love.

Corinth may have been the most valuable congregation to the church throughout the ages. If Corinth had not had all the problems inherent in being a sailor's town, we might not have the letters Paul wrote. If we did not have those letters, we would not know how Paul expected the church to function in a dysfunctional society.

Corinth, like many port cities, became a center of vice and depravity.

It is through Paul's writings to the congregation at Corinth that we know about how the church should deal with division, issues with the Lord's Supper, issues of sexuality, questions about the resurrection of the dead, and forgiveness of repentant Christians. In these letters we see Paul's attitude toward preaching, and his views on how the church should deal with those outside of it.

It is a tale of two cities. Separated in space by only 44 miles (70.8 km), they were separated by light years in attitude. Athens was proud, ancient, and intellectual; and as a result generally close-minded. Corinth was young, wealthy, boisterous, and ambitious; and as a result more open to new ideas. Athens had all the answers; Corinth had all the questions. When Paul approached the Athenians, his answers did not match their answers. When Paul came to the Corinthians his answers were the perfect solution to their questions.

We live with people who are from these two cities. The temptation would be to say that since Corinth was more open, we should teach only those of the Corinthian mind. That would be wrong. Paul went first to Athens. Granted, it was first on the road he traveled, but he did not bypass the city. He taught the Athenians, and had some converts. Those few people are no less valuable than the many he changed in Corinth. In his tale of two cities, Paul shows us that we must not judge the audience. Whether in Athens or Corinth, among the intellectuals or the rabble, our job is to preach the gospel.

BY THE NUMBERS

The British and (to some extent) the Americans are taught from a very young age to believe in fair play. In the National Hockey League, after each round of the playoffs both teams traditionally form lines to shake hands with the same people they were fighting with moments before. Some prefer bow hunting to shooting because it is “more sporting” for the intended dinner. This idea of fairness is most instilled in the composition of competing teams. The numbers of players is always the same. Professional baseball has its 25-man roster, and if someone is injured they may bring a substitute in to replace him. In hockey, the penalty is that you have to play with fewer men on the ice than your opponent. The quality of players may differ from team to team, but the numbers always have to match. The Yankees don’t get to have a 40-man active roster just because they can afford it.

Unlike in war, even our war games demand fairness. There are equal numbers of checkers (draughts) pieces per side. Unless an expert player gives a piece as a handicap, chess is always started with sixteen pieces to a side.

God seems to have a different view of fairness. His view seems to be that even in war his side is so overwhelming that numbers don’t matter. He even told Israel that he expected to win with smaller numbers.

And ye shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. And five of you shall chase an hundred, and an hundred of you shall put ten thousand to flight: and your enemies shall fall before you by the sword. (Lev 26:7-8)

Not only do numbers not matter. In God’s economy, strength is not even proportional to the numbers. Five shall chase a hundred, but twenty times that will chase a hundred times a hundred. A small increase in numbers yields a huge increase in strength.

God wanted Gideon to learn this lesson. The tale is told in Judges 7. The large Midianite army came up against Israel. God told Gideon that his own army was too large. He first told him to send home anyone who was afraid. The army had 22,000 honest men who went home. We are not told how many remained, but that would have been a huge blow to any other army.

The next test involved drinking from the river. God told Gideon, “Every one that lapped of the water with his tongue, as a dog lapped, him shalt thou set by himself; likewise every one that boweth down upon his knees to drink.” It turned out that three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths, and the rest got on their knees to drink directly from the river.

For years, even centuries perhaps, it has been proposed that God chose those who lapped because they were more vigilant and better prepared for battle. After all, they could drink while looking around and with a hand on a sword. The interesting thing, though, is that God didn’t tell Gideon which group would be the fighters until after they were divided. It is probable that if three hundred knelt and the rest lapped, God would have chosen the kneelers. The criterion was not the soldier’s readiness for war, it was the smaller number of soldiers. God chose the smaller number “lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me.” (Jdg 7:2)

We live in a world of megachurches. God doesn’t seem to believe we need megachurches to do his work. There is nothing wrong with a church having attendance in the thousands, but God can work just as easily with a church of 250, or of twenty-five. Smaller churches should never feel unimportant or of less value than larger churches. God defeated Midian with a church of 300. To God, smaller numbers are not less valuable; they are invaluable.

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