

REVISIONIST HISTORY AND THE PRECEDENCE OF THE FAITH

AN EXCERPT OF A SERMON PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S MAY 1, 2005

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Text:

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. ... 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, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world 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." Acts 17:22-31

In a recent article entitled "Playstations of the Cross" an Oregon-based Christian tabloid newspaper editor by the name of Rev. Ralph Bagley pitched his case for his own faith-based version of this popular subculture pastime invading the dark satanic world of the video game business with missionary zeal. As a counterpart to such titles as *Doom* and *Quake*, *Catechumen* (a term for early Christian converts) depicts the adventures of persecuted Christians who are rescued from the catacombs of ancient Rome. Rev. Ralph says he took a class in early Christian history "for accuracy's sake," but I must admit I have some lingering doubts about this techno-revisionism of history.

One of the things I've realized with my own life that has now spanned well over half a century is the cumulative sense and appreciation of history. Not the faraway studies of distant epochs and dynasties, or memorizing the dates of ancient battles or kings, or the shifting geography of nation states. Rather, it is the history of the more recent past in which I have been a living participant. When you realize you've lived long enough to find yourself in your teenager's American history textbook, one feels a sense of being "dated."

For example, there's been the recent observance of an event that occurred fifty years ago that dramatically changed the way American school children looked forward to summer vacation. Once there was fear and dread with the possibility of an outbreak of the polio virus. But the discovery of the effective Salk vaccine led to the first mass immunization programs ever undertaken with school children in 1955-56.

I still remember being lined up and shot in the gymnasium of West Main Elementary. I remember still contracting polio for six very sick weeks in September of that year, because the early series didn't prevent you from contracting the disease, but only spared one from the potential permanent paralysis, or even death.

I even remember my grateful parents writing a thank-you letter to Jonas Salk at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, and receiving a personal reply in which he essentially said, "You're welcome. Glad to hear your boy is doing well." Fifty years later, it's just another footnote to history; and my own personal history, as well.

Another example: This last week our country observed the 30th anniversary of the U.S. fleeing retreat and withdrawal from we called the war in Southeast Asia; the long and bitter conflict still referred to in Vietnam as the *American War*, and our humbling, resounding defeat. Thirty years later in this country there are still lingering scars for some of a whole generation of Americans, along with fading memories of another time and place; even now, as we begin to backlog a whole new generation of severely disabled and traumatized veterans in what some people choose to characterize as an "historically unprecedented time" in a world caught up in what is generally referred to as the War on Terror.

My increased sense of history — and my place in it — makes me increasingly suspicious of terms like “historically unprecedented.” True, medical advances have certainly all but eradicated the threat of large-scale polio epidemics in first-world nations. And we don’t fight our so-called conventional wars with all the same arsenal and strategies as we did thirty years ago. But the underlying sorts of threats to our security and well-being, or the same old conflicts over differing ideologies, beliefs or plain old turf warfare haven’t really changed to any “unprecedented” extent have they?

The *déjà-vu* of history and march of historical time can seem bewildering as we mark the certain past, the puzzling present we struggle to discern, and the unknown and uncertain future. Once the past is in the past, we can usually find some clarity; while, ironically, it’s more often a speculative future that is even clearer with regards to where we’d *like* to be someday. It’s the present moment in which we forever find ourselves that seems the most difficult to grasp, and appreciate its significance. After all, history is nothing more than some cumulative moments which may, or may not, give way to some “historical perspective.” Someday, today will be in the history books; perhaps even of some significance in your personal history.

Now consider, there’s really only one history book in all of the New Testament, the *Book of the Acts of the Apostles*. The gospels are not about history, or even biography for that matter; but are gospels announcing *good news*. The epistles may contain historical anecdotes, but are really theological correspondence. And *Revelation* is certainly far removed from the historical realm! It’s only Luke, the historian and author of *Acts*, who describes various moments in time and place for the early Church; such as Paul preaching in Athens in today’s lesson.

The historical context is the juxtaposition of the world of Greek philosophical thought, God’s created world (*kosmos*), the imperial (socio-political) world of Rome. In his dialogue with the Greek’s, attempting to cover all their bases by even including an altar to “an unknown god,” the spirit of Paul’s message about the One yet unknown to them (sometimes referred to nowadays as the Jesus of history, and the Christ of faith) brings up the essential, underlying question: Do our worldly dealings convey the wonder and goodness of the created divine order? Or are they “world’s apart?” And how can you tell the difference? There are the revisionists of history. And then there is the world of the gospel of Christ. Like Paul, can you discern it in the time and place and moment you are living right now that you call your life.

Those of us who are old enough remember when Walter Kronkite hosted a black-and-white TV series, *You Were There*. He would sign off each episode of what was often a string of old newsreel footage with the same message: “What kind of a day was it? A day like all days, filled with those events, which alter and illuminate our time. And *you were there.*”

Well, we are here. Here we are, in this moment in history, in a world so inhospitable to the gospel of Christ that I wonder if Jesus would even recognize it; and often most particularly in what passes for the face of modern Christianity. In the face of those who might claim these exceptional times as unprecedented, there *is*, for us, precedence still, could we but discern it.

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