

The Church's Threefold Temptation

by Vance Havner

The church is tempted to accommodate to the world's standards, but it must remain authentic and true to its message in order to be effective.

Duration: 26:14

Scripture: 1 Kings 10:1

Topics: "Temptation"

Description

The sermon transcript discusses the importance of approaching church and sermons with a hungry heart, seeking blessings rather than finding faults. The speaker criticizes the tendency to judge and grumble instead of being open to receiving God's message. The sermon also highlights the need for repentance and belief in God, emphasizing that the world is in trouble because it refuses to receive this message. The speaker contrasts the simplicity and effectiveness of preaching in the Welsh revival with the modern-day reliance on technology and organization in the church.

Transcript

Thank you. Those of you who have visited Athens will, I think, agree with me that one of the most inspiring sights anywhere to be seen is to sit in the old city at night and look up to the top of the hill at the Acropolis gleaming in the floodlights and remember, as I said to my dear wife, that edifice was standing before Jesus was born. Twenty centuries ago, a weak-eyed little Jew stood on Mars Hill in Athens and preached the sermon.

He wasn't much to look at. His bodily presence was weak, they said. I get a great encouragement out of that.

God just makes a good-looking man once in a while to relieve the monotony. It is dangerous to be a handsome preacher. I do not speak from experience, but it is dangerous to be a handsome preacher because his preaching may not justify his profile as he stands before them.

Paul was a poor speaker. They said his speech was contemptible. On this momentous occasion, the greatest gospel preacher of all time stood in the center of what had been the greatest civilization of all time.

It has been said that two centuries of ancient Athens produced men who in statesmanship, philosophy, letters, oratory, and art set standards for all subsequent times. Colgate Darden of Virginia said some time ago to a university audience, Young people are no smarter now than Greek young people of 2,500 years ago. They just think they are.

We are better informed, but being better informed is not enough, and it is certainly not being wise, necessarily. A.T. Robertson quotes Furnow as saying concerning Paul in Athens, It is a sad story. The noblest of ancient cities and the noblest man of history, and he never cared to go back again.

Why did Paul not go back to Athens? He went back to Lystra where they dragged him out of town dead. But he had no time to waste on these folks with their mild tolerance. You remember that some of them mocked, some made light of it, a few believed, and others said, we'll hear you again.

Well, they didn't. He would have fared better on outright opposition than on mild tolerance. A bitter hostility to Christianity is better than frivolous endorsement.

The cause of Jesus Christ makes better headway against the world that fights it than against the world that trifles with it. I'd rather people go out of a service mad than just go out. Anything is better than nothing.

Campbell Morgan said the Anglican Church was safer in the days of persecution under Mary than in the days of patronage under Elizabeth. He said Methodism was not nearly as much in danger when it was the object of scorn as when its leaders were received at the royal court. He said the Salvation Army was not in half as much danger when it was pelted with sticks and stones as when its general was received by the king.

He said the church patronized is the church in peril, and very often the church paralyzed. It never suffered a worse blow than when Constantine embraced Christianity. We have a Jewish writer in North Carolina, Harry Golden, who made the observation some time ago that there's nothing to offend in the church today.

And he said more than he realized. The scandal of the cross is gone. It's an interesting study, this visit of Paul to Athens, as to how a Christian ought to act in a pagan city.

He was not in Athens for a vacation. He was there on a vocation. And although the glory of Greece was passed, there's plenty of art yet, philosophy and architecture and statuary, but Paul wasn't impressed.

There's a fad going around today telling us Baptists and others that we ought to get up on our art appreciation. They say we've been country folks long enough. We need to get the hayseed out of our hair and learn how to ooh and aah over the books and the literature and the philosophy of the natural man.

We ought to visit the Broadway plays and sip a little ginger ale at the country club and hobnob with Sodom and get chummy with Gomorrah. When Paul looked over Athens, my Bible says he was not exuberant, he was exasperated. That's what the word says.

Really, it's the word paroxysm. His heart was hot and angry. So he started preaching first in the synagogue and then in the marketplace.

They said, what's this seed-picker talking about? He wasn't a cotton-picking preacher, he was a seed-picking preacher. And they said, what's he talking about? The Athenians were always listening to the newest thing, and Paul sounded like just about the latest thing that had come along. So they took him over

to Mars Hill.

But what impressed Paul was not the fabulous art. It was that altar to an unknown God and how these people need God. That's what bothered him.

If he were in America today, he'd see more idols than he ever saw in Athens. But the preacher of today is not exasperated. When have you had a paroxysm over the condition of things? Amos was God's angry man.

He's told that. But the temptation today is to be an amiable Rotarian, as it were, and just be one of the boys. And as I said yesterday, the prophets of history have never been in love with the status quo, and have never been favorably impressed by things as they are.

We are infected more than we realize in the religious world by Athenianism, always chasing some new thing, mildly interested in many things but completely sold out to nothing, politely tolerant, blase, not concerned enough about anything to be sad, mad, or glad. It has been said that one reason we don't have many great preachers today is because we don't have many great listeners. The average American congregation today is the poorest prepared for Sunday morning of any crowd that ever has come along.

There is a preparation of the people to hear the word of God, as well as the preparation of the preacher to preach the word of God. But they never seem to think so. Who has any idea on Sunday morning, in all the hurry of getting ready for church, of laying aside all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness in order to receive with meekness the engrafted word which is able to save our souls? No poor preacher can in one hour counteract all the tithing and the world, the flesh and the devil have built up all week unless there is a divine intervention from heaven.

In all these years of preaching, I have been amazed at what people say right after church. You wonder what they have been listening to. I was at one of our seminaries not long ago, and I hear that afterwards two of the students were going out, and one of them said to the other, Well, I listened to him carefully, and I have come to the conclusion that he read it.

Now, imagine me trying to preach my heart out, and him sitting out there trying to figure out whether I was reading it or saying it. And I was reminded of the old Scottish lady who came out of church just effervescent over the blessings she had received. And her companion said, Aye, but he read it.

She said, I wouldn't have cared if he'd have whistled it. When you get a blessing, you don't care much about the vehicle if you've got the blessing. I preached the best I knew how some time ago, and some dear soul came up with this prize winner.

He said, Why do you think that dogs never ate the palms of Jezebel's hands? Now, that's a profound inquiry. And I said to him, Well, I'm surprised they ate any of her, as tough as she was. I appreciate a man that comes to hear the word of God because he wants to hear the word of God.

I've just been out in Texas, and they've got a Bible teacher out there. Dr. J.P. Macbeth preached all over Texas. He came just about every night, he and his dear wife, and sat right there in the front like he hadn't heard a sermon in a year.

Those shiny eyes of his were fixed on me all the way through. And I said, Somebody ought to pin a gold medal on that man. He's something different.

It used to make me nervous if a big preacher showed up in the crowd, but I found out that a really big preacher is the easiest man in the world to preach to. And if he just thinks he's a big preacher, he needs preaching to. It's so easy to go to church or to go to the conference with a microscope, looking for something to grumble about, instead of going with a basket looking for a blessing.

Sitting there like a judge at a sermon contest, instead of a hungry heart waiting to be fed and saying, Lord, what have you got for me today? Campbell Morgan used to insist, before he taught, that they sang, Break Thou the Bread of Life, Dear Lord to Me. Almost every time. I've watched folks these days, sometimes I think the mothers will be singing, Mary Had a Little Lamb, as far as preparation of heart is concerned.

I remember years ago at Winona Lake, Dr. Edmund of Wheaton College, saying when I was a young man, went to the old Bible conferences, I used to get under conviction, I didn't want to speak to anybody after meetings, I wanted to go to my room and pray. He said, now we walk out and they say, well, how'd you like him? Well, not as good as the one we had last week. You ought to hear the one that's coming next week.

And then we were afflicted with this malady I call Yes, But. Sit around talking about a preacher, and a bunch of the clergy get together and over to one side and talk about some other preacher, and they say, well, he's fine, but look out. And everything is taken, not with a grain of salt, but with a whole tablespoonful of salt.

And the conversation is, well, that was a good sermon, but. We're never going to have a revival till we cease our Athenianism and come as little children. Willing to sit at the feet of the simplest of God's servants, if he can feed our souls.

They tell it on one of our great seminary professors, was it Dr. Sampi? I don't know. Back in the days of Billy Sunday. Billy was coming to Louisville, I believe, for meetings, and somebody said to this great doctor, Billy is so uncouth in his language and in his preaching.

And the great doctor said, I'm willing for him to break up the king's English so that he can break hearts while he's doing it. Don't sit out there and say, how knoweth this man letters, never having learned. Now, I'm not preaching gullibility.

We must try the Spirit. I noticed today that while there's a lot of talking about the gifts of the Spirit, some of them in particular, I haven't heard anybody yet say much about one of them, the discerning of Spirit. You ever heard much about that? Nobody seems to want that one.

If we had that one, we wouldn't have so much trouble with some of the others, it seems to me. You can go to church with your guard up, and God can get through to you. Or you can go wide open, and the devil can get through to you.

Two things we desperately need, preachers who get agitated in Athens, and listeners who don't come armed just with a notebook, thy word have I hid in my notebook, but who come saying, preacher, what have you got? Am I going to like you any better than I did the one we had yesterday? Such an attitude. Critical. We're too smart for our own good.

I heard of some fellows at a bird exhibit the other day where they had stuffed birds and live birds. One of these smart alecks said to his friend, now look at that one, that's the sorriest job of taxidermy I ever saw. You never saw a bird in your life that held on to a limb like that.

Just about then the bird flew down. We've got a lot of that crowd today. Everything's in a mess.

I talked to a doctor the other day in Peoria, Illinois, up there at Bruce Dunn's great Presbyterian church. That man can preach the gospel. Well, this doctor, it was his day off, and we tramped around through the park.

I said, now, I'm not a doctor. Tell me, are we getting anywhere in medicine? I know we've licked typhoid fever and smallpox and polio and so on, but where are we? He's studying nuclear medicine, isotopes and all that sort of business. Well, he said, yes, we have conquered some.

But he said, the new medicine, the new drugs, and the new light has opened the Pandora's box, and we have new complications and new problems, new ailments we didn't even know we had before. So I don't know just how fast we're getting. I know one thing.

I know they gave me a capsule to take in case I took the flu on adventures, and a year later, what is it? The Food and Drug Administration outlawed that very medicine. I'd been taking the stuff for a solid year. You know how it is.

You take it next year, they say, look out, it may give you cancer. You've had it for a whole year. And last week, why do you know they outlawed Listerine and as many gallons of that as I've gargled? Now they say it might as well use warm water or something.

I said, I don't believe it. I still believe it's good stuff. It tastes awful, but I still believe it's good stuff.

Everything's explained away today. These experts on child culture and how to bring up children who never brought up any themselves have wonderful books on the subject. They can explain anything that Junior does by the book.

Junior bit the meter man. Junior kicked the cook. Junior's antisocial now, according to the book.

Junior smashed the clock and lamp. Junior hacked the tree. Destructive trends are treated in chapters 2 and 3. Junior threw his milk at Mom.

Junior screamed for more. Notes on self-assertiveness are found in chapter 4. Junior tossed his shoes and socks out into the rain. Negation, that, and normal disregard the stain.

Junior got in Grandpop's room and tore up his fishing line. That's to gain attention. See page 89.

But Grandpop seized a slipper and yanked Junior across his knee for Grandpop hadn't read a book since 1893. The title of that poem is On Getting Behind With One's Reading. I think that'd be a good thing if we got behind with some of our reading these days.

We're too smart. Everything, even in the church today, is organized, standardized, systematized, computerized, Xeroxed, mimeographed, microfilmed. But we don't have any revival.

Now, the Welsh Revival didn't have any of that. They had no publicity except that it was its own publicity. No songbooks, no choirs, no orphans, no promotion, no preacher a good deal of the time.

They had big preachers there, but they didn't get to preach. Campbell Morgan was out there and Gypsy Smith and General Booth, but they didn't preach. Evan Roberts preached some.

They didn't have any of these things. Poor folks. All they had was God.

We may get around to God yet. Evan Roberts got worried, though, that it got to the place where they were looking for Evan Roberts. If they could just get Evan Roberts here now, we'd have a great revival.

He knew that wouldn't work. So he came in one night and here was this crowd and he walked out on the platform and said, Do you believe that where two or three are gathered in his name he's there? Amen! Do you believe the Lord is here tonight? Amen! Well, he said, You don't need me then. Put on his hat and coat and left.

It was a dramatic way of driving home what needs to be driven home. All they had was God. And Benny Graham is getting out these buttons now with Try God on it.

Pretty good idea. We've tried everything else. Prove me now and see if I won't open the windows of heaven.

And Brother spread that out a little bit more beyond tithing. That'll take in all the territory. Paul's sermon to the Greeks in Athens is a different approach from preaching to the Jews in Jerusalem, of course.

He'd been bothered about that altar of the unknown God and he said, I've got news for you. I want to tell you about him. And he preached on revelation, resurrection, and repentance.

The world doesn't know God. Sin's the trouble. God has revealed himself in his Son who became our sin.

Christ died and rose from the dead. He'll judge the world. God has appointed a time, ordained a judge, and commanded repentance.

That's it. That's the message. And the trouble with the world today is we won't receive the message.

Like the Athenians, some mock and a few believe and some pass it up. You won't hear much about it in Congress. You won't hear anything about it in the UN.

You won't hear much about it on TV panels and experts in politics and the press discussing the problems of our time. When Paul mentioned the resurrection, that stopped the sermon. The resurrection's the cornerstone of the gospel and it's the stumbling stone of this world.

They tell me now that over at Duke University, they're beginning a new study on life after death, trying to get into some kind of communication. I feel like going over there and saying, you fellows ever heard of Jesus Christ? He was in connection with them. He could communicate.

He said, Lazarus, come out! And out he came. He said to that little girl, maiden, get up. And she got up.

He said to the widow's son, young man, arise. And he arose. Then he died and came back to tell us about it.

Everything stands or falls at the resurrection, and if thou shalt confess with thy mouth, Jesus is Lord, and shalt believe in thine heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. You have ridden along, many of you, from Athens to Corinth down that oleander trail. And you've thought about Paul.

Some say Paul failed in Athens, that he tried to accommodate his message to the philosophy and the intellectualism of the listeners. I don't believe that. Some believed, and a great church was started, and it

was going in the fourth century after Corinth had disappeared.

One thing is certain. At Corinth, he set up a standard, we're in danger of forgetting. He declared that the gospel is a contradiction to the wisdom of man, calls it the foolishness of God and the weakness of God.

Now, what strange terms. The foolishness of God. And did you ever write that out and look at it? It looks strange.

The weakness of God. We speak of the wisdom of God. We talk about God Almighty.

Who thinks in terms of the foolishness of God? The weakness of God. And it says this foolishness of God is moronic. That's where you get the word moron.

It's moronic to this world today. Christianity is blowing a fuse now, trying to sound intellectual. We're trying to dress up the foolishness of God in the wisdom of man.

We're trying to fortify the weakness of God with human power. Trying to modernize the faith and revamp worship. Give Jesus a new look.

And the music of the pagans, which is an excuse for not being able to make music, has invaded the sanctuary, and we've moved from hymns to hootenannies. The church used to go to the jungle, and now the jungle's come to the church. And the midweek prayer meeting's been crossed with the nightclub.

And the church is running a showboat instead of a lifeboat. And we're out to please the Athenians, and it's the old argument, the end justifies the means, forgetting that the means determines the end. And if the means is unworthy, you've defeated the objective before you ever get through it.

We forget that if the preaching of the cross is to the world foolishness, it follows of necessity that the preachers of the cross must be to the world fools. There's no way around that logic. We preachers are not tourists in Athens.

We're not diplomats out to arrange a summit conference where prophets announcing an ultimatum, God's going to judge the world by the man he's ordained, whom he raised from the dead. That's what poetry is. And what we need today is a generation of fools for Christ's sake, busy not with the preaching of foolishness, but the foolishness of preaching, who don't get excited over Athenian art and don't get ecstatic about Greek philosophy and don't get enamored with Athens, who can stand and see behind all the glamour of today the rottenness of it.

Pausanias says that even in Athens they had an altar to energy. That sounds familiar today when an American kneels at the Shrine of Energy, how to create it and how to conserve it. Now, Paul may not have gurgled and effervesced in an art gallery, but he had seen a sight that spoiled him for everything else.

And he had little taste for statues and shrines. On a Damascus road, he'd had a face-to-face encounter, and a head-on collision with Jesus Christ. He had seen the face of Jesus, tell him not of oath beside.

He had heard the voice of Jesus, and his soul was satisfied. He had turned his eyes upon Jesus. He had looked full in that wonderful face.

And all the things of earth, including Athens, had grown strangely dim in the light of that glory and grace. He had learned what it takes us a long time to find out sometimes, that the way to wisdom is through

foolishness, that the way to strength is through weakness, that the way to life is through death, that you're fine by losing, that you can have nothing and everything, that even death can be a paying proposition, not loss but gain, and that all that matters is not me and mine, but him and his. To know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, and conformity to his death.

You've gone a long way, friend, when you've moved from me and mine to him and his. That's what it's all about. And when you have graduated *cum sum laude* from that school, Athens doesn't have anything to offer.

But you've got everything to offer. For when a man knows Jesus Christ, all things are his. And he is Christ.

And Christ is God.

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