

THE UNKNOWN GOD

“... what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.” (Acts 17:23)

Don Richardson, in his excellent book *Eternity in Their Hearts*, provides insight that has had a profound impact upon my understanding of missions. Here are some of the basics.

- All of the people of earth are descendants of Noah through his three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Genesis 10 provides a general outline of the nations they established.
- Henry Halley, and others, point out that all branches of the human race have traditions of a world wide flood. Since it did happen, of course, this is to be expected.
- In addition to this knowledge of the flood, all the peoples of earth are also connected by history and tradition to God. The further back you go, the fewer the gods.
- Since we speak different languages, each nation has its own special name for the One True God. In China He is known as Shang Ti. The Koreans call Him Hananim. The Bantu Tribes call Him Koro. The Gedeo people call Him Magano. The Incas called Him Viracocha. Abram called Him Jehovah. Melchizedek called Him God Most High, etc.

Richardson reveals the practical application of this information with a variety of illustrations. Take, for example, Lars Skrefsrud and Hans Borreson who began mission work with the Santal Tribe north of Calcutta in 1867. In the course of learning the language they came across the designation of “Thakur Jiu” which literally means “The Genuine God”. The Santal people believe that Thakur Jiu destroyed the earth with a flood but saved a “holy pair”. Thakur Jiu then divided their descendants into different people groups. The Santals moved eastward from forest to forest and ultimately came to the Khyber Pass. Like Israel coming out of Egypt, they soon reverted to idolatry. Since “Maran Buru” was “the spirit of the mountain” they sought his help in order to gain safe passage over the mountains. In time, the True God, Thakur Jiu, was all but forgotten. Learning this history, the missionaries wisely told the Santal people that they had come as representatives of Thakur Jiu, Who sent His Son to save them from their sins. When these pagans understood this message a revival broke out and as many as 80 people per day were baptized into Christ.

This is precisely what Paul did when he preached to the Athenians on Mars Hill. When he chose to represent the “Unknown God” he was reaching back into their history and connecting their minds with the Sovereign of the Universe. Here is a brief synopsis of the story as related by Richardson. Among other sources, this information came from Diogenes Laertius, a third century Greek author.

- Six hundred years before Christ there was a plague in Athens.
- The people believed this curse came because they had violated their promise of amnesty and murdered the followers of Cylon who had surrendered to them in good faith.
- They had hundreds of idols, but their prayers and sacrifices to these false gods was futile.
- A priestess told them to send to Crete and seek help from the prophet Epimenides.
- Epimenides reasoned that there must be a God more powerful than all these others.
- He “assumed” that this all powerful God would help them if they admitted the ignorance.
- Therefore, they offered sacrifices to the “Unknown God” and the plague was stopped.
- One altar to this all powerful God was preserved for Paul to see.
- Paul recognized that this “Unknown God” was really Jehovah.
- Paul even quoted the “prophet” Epimenides in his letter to Titus. Remember that Titus was on the island of Crete when Paul wrote: “Even one of their own prophets has said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.’ “ (Titus 1:12)

When the Athenians heard Paul preach they responded in three different ways. 1. Some sneered. 2. Some said they wanted to hear Paul speak again on this subject. 3. Some became followers of Paul and believed (See Acts 17:32 - 34)

It is both interesting and important to remember that two thousand years later, those who hear the Gospel respond in the same three ways. In which group are you?