*Christ Presbyterian Church*

*School of Discipleship*

*November 17, 2019*

**WORLD UPSIDE DOWN**

*A Study of C. Kavin Rowe’s World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age*

**Chapter Two: Collision – Explicating Divine Identity**

* At its core, the Christian mission is an “APOCALYPSE” (lit. “uncovering,” “revelation”).
* This revelation, more than merely being a list of academic theses, is carried in THE FORMATION OF A PEOPLE (“church”).
* This process of revelation and formation, by definition, entails a necessary challenge to constitutive patterns of pagan (nonChristian) life. “Embracing the theological vision of the Christian gospel simultaneously creates a new cultural reality.”
* “Once one grasps the primary – *sensu stricto* – importance of God for a total way of life, the conflict becomes intelligible. Converting to the God of the Christians was not merely an adjustment of this or that aspect of an otherwise unaltered basic cultural pattern; rather, worshipping the God of the Christians simultaneously involved (1) an extraction or removal from constitutive aspects of pagan culture, and (2) a concomitant cultural profile that rendered Christians identifiable as a group by outsiders.”
* **“Christian ecclesial life, in other words, was the cultural explication of God’s identity.”**

In the book of Acts there are four particularly illuminating accounts in which the reconfiguration of divine identity necessitated by the witness of early missionaries resulted in a collision between the expansion of the gospel and essential assumptions of ancient pagan life:

**(1) Acts 14:8-19 Paul and Barnabas – Hermes and Zeus**

Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, said in a loud voice, “Stand upright on your feet.” And he sprang up and began walking. And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.” Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them. But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.

**(2) Acts 16:16-24 Power at Philippi**

As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and us, crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, “These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.” The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

**(3) Acts 17:16-31 Athens**

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually 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 are indeed his offspring.’ Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

**(4) Acts 19:18-20, 23-41 Ephesus**

**Conclusion:**

* These four passages display “the profound incommensurability between the life-shape of Christianity in the Graeco-Roman world and the larger pattern of pagan religiousness” – resting ultimately in **the theological affirmation of** **the break between God and the cosmos.** Pagan religion – whether the superstition in Philippi, the official cultic religion in Lystra and Ephesus, or the Greek philosophical theology in Athens – “knows only the cosmos; it does not know God.”
* Because “religion” in the Graeco-Roman world was inseparable from the rest of life, to question pagan religion was to critique pagan culture itself. “The connection of religion and politics was so close that to attack one was automatically to undermine the other.”
* The priests and crowds in Lystra, religious salesmen and colony magistrates in Philippi, philosophers and political authorities in Athens, and magistrates and craftsmen in Ephesus, taken together “demolish the possibility of holding that the Christian mission was culturally innocuous. . . . These characters are, in fact, literary emodiments of the pagan reaction to the threat of cultural demise.”
* **(November 24) Chapter 3: *Dikaios* – Rejecting Statecraft**
* **(December 8) Chapter 4: World Upside Down – Practicing Theological Knowledge**
* **(December 15) Chapter 5: The Apocalypse of Acts and the Life of Truth**