

THE THIRD WAY – SESSION 6

Academy of Christian Discipleship

Introduction

In Thessalonica Roman authorities accused Christians of “turning the world upside down” (Acts 17:1-9). There was something about this new movement that proved to be disruptive and threatening, though not in a revolutionary way, which probably made it all the more disruptive and threatening. It did not resist or fight as Rome did, crushing its enemies. Instead, Christians called Jesus Lord and formed communities that followed a different way of life. It was peacefully subversive, or subversively peaceful. It was the *Third Way*, neither accommodating itself to Rome nor isolating itself from Rome but instead infiltrating and transforming Rome with the Good News of Jesus and the Kingdom way of life.

A number of current writers are calling the church to live as “resident aliens” in our culture. I would prefer to use the phrase “alien residents” because this world really belongs to God and his people. However fallen and broken the world is, God means to redeem people and transform the world, *this world*. The point is for Christians to think of themselves as citizens of Christ’s kingdom, and then to live accordingly. This is the Christian’s primary identity. It is more fundamental than political affiliation or national citizenship or ethnic/racial identity.

This is especially hard for Americans to grasp and accept because our cultural heritage and religious identity are so deeply intertwined. We have always thought of our nation as a Christian nation, and many Christians continue to fight to preserve this identity, both on the right and on the left. That we are becoming more post-Christian, especially on the coasts, is forcing us to choose which identity will predominate. Our current circumstances are making the Third Way increasingly relevant. It is becoming far less attractive to be an American Christian and far more compelling to be a Christian who just happens to live in America.

Josh Leim will focus his lecture on Acts 17, which tells the story of Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica where the phrase “turning the world upside down” first appears. Jerry Sittser will explore “The So-Called Letter to Diognetus,” which explains the peculiar nature of Christian identity during the early Christian period. Terry McGonigal will tell stories about what it might mean for us today. Be prepared to think about what it means to be kingdom people in an increasingly post-Christian world.

Resident Aliens in the Acts of the Apostles (6.1)

Introduction: becoming an American citizen

Acts: the supremacy of Jesus and his kingdom

See Acts 8:12, Acts 14:21, and Acts 19:8

Observation: conversion to Jesus and citizenship in the kingdom

The American problem: individualism (think *Frozen* here!)

Socialization: into a way of life (see James Davison Hunter)

Socialization into the Kingdom!

Acts 17:1-9

Background
Thessalonica

Loyal to Rome

Coins

Imperial cult

The dominance of Caesar: power!

Acts 17:1-9

Women and community

New way of life

The Charges:

1. Turning the world upside down
2. Acting against decrees of Caesar
3. Proclaiming another king

Are the charges true? No, and yes!

See I Thessalonians

1:6-10

2: 11-12

4:15-16

5:13-18

See Acts 15!

What happens when we do NOT identify with God's people and live for God's kingdom?

Resident Aliens in Early Christianity (6.2)

The First Way: Roman

The Second Way: Jewish

The Third Way: Christian

1. No observable differences
2. Yet different, too
3. Belief/membership in a spiritual kingdom
4. Concealed, but revealed
5. Resistance movement
6. Jesus at the center

Growth, change, impact

What are the characteristics of the Third Way of Life?

(See "The So-Called Letter to Diognetus")

(See references to Sermon on the Mount and I Cor. 4)

Analogy of Soul and Body

What is the Christian belief system that leads to such behavior?

1. Creation
2. Incarnation
3. Atonement
4. Imitation

Resident Aliens Today (6.3)

Five examples:

1. Philippians: the problem (Phil. 1:15-17, 28; 4:2-4)
The solution: 2:19-24, 2:25-30, 4:8-9, 4:5-11
2. Surfing the Nations
3. Luke 18:35-43 and 19:1-10

4. James in Liberia: Ebola Crisis

5. Woman fasting and praying for DACA (Dreamers) at U.S. capitol

Spiritual Exercise

The challenge is for Christians to think about—or better, train themselves into—becoming followers of Jesus and citizens of his kingdom, which is not *of* this world but certainly *over* this world, *in* this world, and *for* this world. This will inevitably lead to the subordination of all other identities to this one identity, all other memberships to citizenship in the kingdom. Christians might still vote Republican or Democrat, they still might belong to the NRA or volunteer for Planned Parenthood, they still might support Black Lives Matter or #MeToo or DACA or any number of other causes. But they will be less loyal to these other causes, or at least loyal in a different way, more critical of their excesses, and ultimately committed to the kingdom above all other loyalties.

So this is your spiritual exercise for the month. First, pray and ponder the idolatries that afflict your life. You will know that they are idols because you think about them a lot, you get irritated and angry when they are challenged, you define your identity by them. You might, for example, find yourself furious by our current president, or you might find yourself angry at the people who ridicule him so much. You might feel deep suspicion about refugees and immigrants as threats to the American way of life, or you might despise people who want to protect America by excluding refugees and immigrants. We might resent wealthy people because “they get all the breaks and the system is bent in their favor” or you might complain about all the whiners in our society who need to take responsibility for their actions and simply work harder. We all have our idolatries and identities that run contrary to kingdom identity. We must repent of these. Anger and obsession is the sign.

Second, commit yourself every day to citizenship in Jesus’ kingdom. He taught us what it means to belong to it. Read Matthew 5:1-2, for example. He calls us to himself as Savior and Lord; he calls us to follow and obey him. You will know your life is lining up with the

kingdom because you will find yourself increasingly unable to identify with other parties and identities. They will seem ill-fitting.

Third, pray the Lord's Prayer every day. Focus especially on the one phrase, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Pray the Lord's Prayer INTO YOUR LIFE. What does it mean that his kingdom will come, his will done in your life, in your circumstances, in your community? Early Christians prayed the Lord's Prayer five times a day. Try it once a day.

Special Project

During the last week of this month, just before you start a new session, ponder what your life circumstances are in that given week. What is your schedule like? Who will you meet and see? How will you be spending your time? Where will you be going? Think about this week in concrete terms. For example, my week will consist of meeting with students, writing at home, welcoming people in our home, seeing at least some of my children and grandchildren, exercising and doing chores, running errands, and of course spending time with my wife. Then imagine what it would be like for you to live this one week out as a follower of Jesus and citizen of his kingdom. How will you treat retail people and cashiers? How will you drive? How will you respond to opponents and enemies? How will you handle the news you read on-line or see on TV or on the internet? How will you use technology? How present will you be to relationships? How will you do ordinary tasks? How will you care for loved ones? How will you live out the character of Christ? In my case, I want to exhibit patience, gratitude, and generosity. I want to be attentive and kind to people. I want to limit the amount of time I spend on the internet. I want to be charitable toward opponents. And so forth.

In short, you are experimenting, trying on what it means to live a kingdom life under the Lordship of Jesus. You will then share about this with the members of your cohort.

Homework Assignments

The focus on the homework assignment over the next month is Acts 17: 1-9, which tells the story of the planting of the church in Thessalonica, and on Paul's first letter to that church.

WEEK ONE

- Pray
- Read Acts 17:1-9. Keep pondering why Roman officials turned against Christianity? What about this movement was so threatening? What were the three accusations leveled against the church? Why these three? What does that say about the Christian movement then?
- Read I Thessalonians, either in one sitting or, if you wish to spread it out over the entire week, three or four or even five sittings. What do you learn from this book

that explains the account in Acts 17:1-9? And vice versa. In short, how do these two texts inform each other?

- What do that teach you about living as a disciple in the world?
- Pray for discernment.

WEEK TWO

- Pray
- Read Acts 17:1-9
- Read I Thessalonians
- Pray

WEEK THREE

- Pray
- Read Acts 17:1-9
- Read I Thessalonians
- Pray

WEEK FOUR

- Pray
- Read Acts 17:1-9
- Focus on the project
- Pray

Cohort Questions

First Cohort Session

1. Begin with prayer.
2. In this first time together discuss what you learned from your study of Acts 17:1-9 and I Thessalonians. How did you see connections between the two? How do you see it as relevant to your own life?
3. Then discuss the presentations, especially the one on Acts. What does it mean to be a “resident alien” or “alien resident” as defined by the early church? How did it change their lives? How did it shape the way they lived in the Roman world?
4. If you have time, discuss the presentation of the early Christian movement, too. Review what the first way is, the second way, and the third way. What does “The So-Called Letter to Diognetus” say about early Christian behavior or lifestyle? What did the early Christians believe about creation, incarnation, and redemption? What does it mean and how is it possible to become imitators of God?
5. Pray for each other.

Second Cohort Session

1. Begin with prayer.
2. Share any insight and explore questions about the Bible study and the presentations on the video. Do you have any questions about how Christians

turned the world upside down? What exactly did they do? How about early Christian lifestyle and belief? Are you gaining a sense of what it means to belong to the Third Way? Review it.

3. Focus most of your discussion on the exercise and the project. What did you learn from the experiment of trying to live a kingdom life during one ordinary week? How did you do? What challenges did you face? What steps do you need to take at this point?
4. Pray for each other.