

# An Altar for the One Unseen But Not Unknown

A meditation for the Festival of the Christian Home, based on Acts 17:22-31

Don Friesen  
Ottawa Mennonite Church  
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Saint Luke, in writing his Gospel, ended it as did the other gospel writers, with the story of Jesus' resurrection. Easter represents the apex of the gospel story. Luke, however, wrote a sequel to his Gospel, showing the effect Jesus' resurrection had on his followers. If the crucifixion dispirited them, the resurrection seemed to inject them with great energy and boldness. The Christian movement began to spread—from Jerusalem to Caesarea and Philippi and many other cities, not least among them the city of Athens, the intellectual centre of ancient Greece.

Paul, aka Saul of Tarsus, was at the forefront of this movement and expansion, and was superbly suited to the task. The child of devout Jews, Paul had been immersed in an Hebraic Weltanschauung, yet, having grown up in a Greek city and culture, he had a tremendous ability for translating concepts from one cultural context to the other.

## An Ancient Altar in Athens

Arriving in Athens, however, Paul couldn't help but notice that the Athenians were very religious (Acts 17:22). Athens took its name from the goddess Athena, Olympian goddess of wisdom, patron of the arts of peace and war. No one could miss the statue erected in her honour, a statue so large that sailors could see the sunlight reflected from her upraised spear some 40 miles away. But Athena was not alone; it was said that there were more statues of the gods in Athens than in all the rest of Greece put together and that in Athens it was easier to meet a god than a human being!

Paul even found an altar in Athens with the inscription, "To an unknown god." (Acts 17:23) A "President's Choice" type of altar, I guess—in honour of a generic divinity, dispensing a "no-name" brand of spirituality. Never one to allow an accusation of impertinence to bother him, Paul told the Athenians, "What you worship but do not know—this is what I now proclaim!" (17:23, NEB) And then, though we don't have time to touch on its nuances, Paul does a masterful job of engaging Athens' intelligentsia on their own turf, quoting Greek poets and Stoic philosophers with ease, and with sheer audacity introducing them to a God greater than any local god, name or no-name! Always conciliatory and courteous, he plays upon their intellectual broad-mindedness, presenting a God much broader and vast in scope than any of their local deities, in effect telling them they are wasting their great capacity for religion on unworthy recipients. If you are going to be religious, Athenians, be religious in a way as magnificent as your surroundings!

## Altars in Modern Times

We live in a similar context, though without benefit of the glorious art and architecture. Western culture offers a veritable smorgasbord of spiritualities, any personal fetish or

preference reason enough to start yet another group. People want “designer religion,” the opportunity to cultivate a highly personal form of religiosity—what some have called “pastiche spirituality”. (Jeremiah Creedon, “God with a million faces: The new mix-and-match approach...,” from a series of articles on “Designer Religion” in Utne Reader, 1998(?)) But making a collage of various religious traditions is akin to digging too many wells in a desert! (John Daido Looi Roshi, “Should you design your own religion?” Utne Reader...)

On a Sunday on which we focus on the family and reflect upon passing on Christian faith to the next generation, it might be well to point our children to the well where we have already found water, and to give them the best that our religious tradition has to offer. In a pluralistic environment in which many spiritualities are only as old as their authors, we need to be more conscientious than ever about preserving our faith, not in an unknown and untried God, but in the manner suggested in the hymn we just sang:

He comes in truth when faith is grown—  
believed, obeyed, adored;  
the Christ in all the scriptures shown,  
as yet unseen, but not unknown,  
our Saviour and our Lord.  
(Hymnal: A Worship Book, #498, verse 5)

It is urgent, in a marketplace of spiritualities, to take the Church’s educational task seriously. It’s important to equip our children with a solid biblical understanding, and to help them to use it to look critically at all philosophies and spiritualities. It’s important to equip them to articulate their faith, until they can speak as fluently of gospel, goodness, and God as they do of bits, bytes, and baud!

God, though unseen, is known to us—known to us as Creator; known to us as Lord; known to us as Comforter, Sustainer, Redeemer, and a hundred other names and metaphors, none of which are sufficiently comprehensive to capture the Divine nature but each of which gives us a glimpse of yet another facet of God’s nature and glory. And it is the task of the Church—of us, collectively, whether or not we have children—to pass on what we know of God to the next generation, so that they too may “live and move and have (their) being” (17:28) in God.

### **Maintain the Family Altar**

I would suggest that in counterpoint to the many altars dedicated to unknown or unproven gods we do our utmost to maintain a metaphorical altar of our own, a family altar—a conscientious effort to convey to our children the spirit of Christ. To do so requires personal example, traditional spiritual disciplines, and a lot of talking, making a special effort to interpret human life to our children, not from a pedestrian secular perspective but in the light of eternity, conveying to them that there is more to human existence than the material.

A father stressed out by his frantic schedule and work pressures was starting to snap at his wife and children while choking down his food at mealtimes. He felt increasingly irritated by interruptions, even from children who loved him. One of his daughters, sensing his short attention span, wanted to tell him something, and said, “Daddy, I wanna tell you somethin’ and I’ll tell you really fast.” Realizing her frustration, the father answered, “Honey, you tell me—and you don’t have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly.”

Replied his little daughter, "Then listen slowly." (Bits & Pieces, June 24, 1993, pages 13-14)

To maintain a family altar requires a deep commitment to place God at the centre of family life, and to take all the time needed lest we convey to our children that the things of God are yet another "fast food" type of consumable. It means living our lives as though we believe the Gospel. It means forgiving when forgiveness hurts; showing compassion to all—not just those we like; loving when it doesn't seem like we have any love left!

May God, who promised not to leave us orphans—to leave us without family—grant us the strength and imagination to nurture our children with all that is good, noble and true.  
AMEN

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## **Comments Shared in Conjunction with the Child Dedication Ceremony**

I had a vision this week. Or maybe it was just my imagination weaving a whimsical fantasy, but anyway, I saw this picture of our congregation as it might appear in about thirty years, and it set me wondering if the children being dedicated today would still be members of OMC thirty years from now! Picture, if you will, the Year 2029, the last traces of the Y2K problem having finally vanished, and OMC Church Council is meeting at Ryan Mann's cottage. A large part of Council's agenda is taken up with issues surrounding the senior citizens' complex built out back ten years earlier in response to Tim Werschler's 1999 comments about the "Geritol Express". Council members are also getting ready to do another ministerial review—the seventeenth one—of their ailing but tenacious minister. Gabriella Hilkes is chairing the Council meeting, hoping the Council will agree to her plan to rename OMC "Waterloo-North North". Sidney Roth is heading the Education Committee, which is now offering all of its Sunday School classes online with the use of some equipment obtained from Nortel when it moved to a tax haven south of here. Nicolas Abanto, as chair of the Ministerial Committee, is sharing plans for the next Weekend of Worship and Reflection, and reports that their next guest, Laura Ruby, the new Conference Minister, will appear by live satellite feed from the Waterloo Office of the Mennonite Conference of Eastern Kitchener. As these reports are shared with Church Council, Rebecca Whitford, head of the Business Committee, interrupts to complain about the church's leaky roof, saying, "My grandfather told you to fix that already in the last millenium!"

Well, as I said, it's just a fantasy, but it's no stretch of the imagination to picture these newborn children in church leadership thirty years from now. There is, of course, a lot of work to be done in the intervening years to achieve that, and the burden for much of it falls on parents. The intense pre-school years, followed by the intense and tumultuous teenage years, followed by the intense and expensive post-secondary years demand a lot of parents.

Parenting, at any age, is a lot of work. An old college friend of Theodore Roosevelt visited him at the White House, but during their chat Roosevelt's daughter, Alice, kept running in and out of the room until the friend finally asked if there wasn't something

Roosevelt could do to control her. “Well,” said the President, “I can do one of two things. I can be President of the United States or I can control Alice. I cannot possibly do both.”

Parenting is demanding, and perhaps parents, by the year 2029, will have to undergo annual competency testing. If not, there’s a self-test you can administer—ways to know if you’re really a parent. You know you’re a parent, for example, when at your daughter’s birthday party you count the sprinkles on each kid’s cupcake to make sure they’re equal. You know you’re a mother when you have time to shave only one leg at a time. You know you’re a father when you fast-forward the VCR through the scene where the hunter shoots Bambi’s mother. You know you’re a bona fide parent when your child throws up and you catch it; when you’ve mastered the art of placing food on a plate without anything touching; and when you read that the average five-year-old asks 437 questions a day and you feel proud that your kid is above average!

Inevitably some of the 400 questions children ask parents have to do with matters of faith, and it’s important that we devote ourselves to responding to those questions with the same level of devotion we give to our children’s many other activities.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5), say the Scriptures, urging us not only to do this ourselves, but to “Recite (matters of faith) to (our) children and (to) talk about them when (we) are at home and when (we) are away...” (Deuteronomy 6:7), and at all other times and places. (6:7-9)

As a church family we take this injunction seriously, and for that reason dedicate our children to God. It marks our commitment to our children’s spiritual formation and nurture. We can’t assume the development of Christian character, so we promise to give much energy and effort toward this significant task. Each gentle nudge, each prayer, each gesture of encouragement is a significant contribution to the formation of their spirits and character. Each smile, each hug, each gentle touch of reassurance, each listening ear, each shared meal, each apology, is important. Each worship service, each Junior Fellowship event, each youth event, each service trip is one more encouragement to make God a part of our children’s life.

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All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.