

# Grace for the Day

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## Does Religious Harmony Affect Our Witness? (Part 2 of 2)

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In our previous article, we looked at Singapore's concern about religious harmony, and how that is expressed in the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (1992). We looked at the nature of offense and took a glimpse of what we can learn from Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles when it comes to the goal of an effective and inoffensive witness. Today, we review and continue our discussion.

### Lessons from Paul

One of the first places Paul evangelized was South Galatia. There he and Barnabas healed a man in the city of **Lystra**. The people tried to sacrifice to Barnabas and Paul thinking they were gods (Ac 14:11-13). Their action tells us Barnabas and Paul did not spend their time condemning their gods before this event. Otherwise, the misunderstanding could not have occurred.

Paul tried to stop them saying: *"Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. <sup>16</sup>In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; <sup>17</sup>yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good — giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy." <sup>18</sup>Even with these words, they scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them."* (Acts 14:15-18, NRSV).

The tenor is clearly the exposition of the true God rather than a castigation of the pagan gods. The only term used to describe what the Lystrans were doing was "worthless things" (Gk: *mataios*). This can refer to the gods, but more likely, to the sacrificial activity that Barnabas and Paul were declining. The term can mean "worthless" (also NIV); "vain" (KJV, NASB), "unreal" (Weymouth), etc. In the OT, the Hebrew equivalent of "vain," repeated so often in Ecclesiastes, also carries a strong sense of that which is transient. Paul used a term that was true but not unnecessarily offensive. He did not say what they did was nonsense, false, evil, or any other stronger term. Could the Lystrans be offended by the term *mataios*? Yes. There was, however, the reality that Paul was trying to share the truth with them. The term *mataios* (worthless, vain = empty, unreal, or transient) is a term that avoided offense without compromising truth.

**When Paul went to Thessalonica**, he taught in the synagogue that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead and that he was their long awaited Messiah. Those who rejected the message tried to get rid of Barnabas and Paul by framing it as a political issue. They accused Barnabas and Paul of defying Caesar's decrees and recast Jesus' kingship as subversive towards Rome (Ac 17:1-7). This is a cautionary tale for us. As Jesus was accused of subversion, so were Barnabas and Paul. When it is difficult to employ governmental powers on

Christians, we may find ourselves under a fabricated political charge.

In the case of Singapore, we can say that the MRHA removes the necessity of such falsehood. If there is an issue of religious offense, Singaporeans are free to openly discuss it as a religious issue. This is probably an unintended benefit of the MRHA. That is to say, if a Christian becomes involved in an issue that can cause discord, there would be no need for the Christian to be accused under a political charge.

Next, we observe **Paul at the Areopagus** in Athens. We notice Paul's tactful words and inoffensive references to the Greek gods while making his point:

<sup>22</sup>*Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. <sup>23</sup>For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. <sup>24</sup>The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, <sup>25</sup>nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. <sup>26</sup>From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, <sup>27</sup>so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him — though indeed he is not far from each one of us. <sup>28</sup>For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'*

<sup>29</sup>*Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. <sup>30</sup>While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance,*

*now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup>because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:22-31, NRSV)*

The only word that may surprise modern readers, but not the Greeks, is the term for "extremely religious" (*deisidaimonesterous*). This is a compound word comprising *deidō* [fear] + *daimōn* [god] + the superlative.

The "god" here is *daimōn* from which we get the English word demon. The Greeks have different words for god, *daimōn* being one. This was not a pejorative term. It was regularly used to refer to lesser gods or to the spirit within a person. For example, Socrates was said to be inspired by his *daimōn*. When a person is good spirited, he has a *eu-daimōn*. Specific deities would be called *daimōn*, such as the storm god / *daimōn*. Over time, the Christian designation of non-Christian deities as demons developed into a term that can be offensive. The term came to mean malevolent spirits. But this was not the meaning in Paul's time. He was referring to their deities as they would address their deities.

This is highly instructive for us. When Paul used the term *daimōn* = demon, it was a respectful term. When we use the term demon, it can be offensive since its etymology is lost in the English word "demon." Hence, it is better for Christians to use the term the non-Christians use when we refer to their deities (e.g. idol, god/shen, spirit, etc.) than to use Paul's actual term (*daimōn*) when the meaning of that term has devolved.

We now come to the point where Paul's missionary work generated much religious and political conflict. **At Ephesus**, Paul and his team exorcized evil spirits. This led to the burning of books of the curious arts, to a riot organized by the idol makers, to

Paul's imprisonment, and his eventual release (Acts 19). We flesh out the narrative and see what happened.

<sup>11</sup>And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, <sup>12</sup>so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. <sup>13</sup>Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus, whom Paul proclaims." <sup>14</sup>Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. <sup>15</sup>But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" <sup>16</sup>And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. <sup>17</sup>And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. <sup>18</sup>Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices.

<sup>19</sup>And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. <sup>20</sup>So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. (Acts 19:11-20, ESV).

Three terms require our attention. The first is "evil spirit" (*to pneuma to ponēra*). The term "*daimōn* / demon" was not used because the reference is to malevolent spirits. Luke avoided a vocabulary that might identify evil spirits to the Greek gods. (NIV is modern day contextualized in translating the term as "demon-possessed" in Acts 19:13).

We are told newly converted Christians came forward to confess and divulge their practices. Ostensibly, these new converts had clung on to the curious arts, but the

episode helped them make a final break from their past practices. The Greek word is: *tas praxeis*. It is translated "practices" (ESV, NRSV, NASB, etc.) and "deeds" (KJV, NKJV). Practices is probably more accurate as it referred to specific spiritual practices associated with evil spirits rather than the more general "deeds." Here the NIV translation of "evil deeds" is another overreach. The word "evil" is not there. *Tas praxeis* is the word from which we get "practice" or "praxis." Despite the fact that these confessions were related to activities associated with evil spirits, Luke avoided using a term that may suggest a religious practice was evil.

The third word (Acts 19:19) is *periergos*, translated "curious arts" (KJV), "magic arts" (ESV), "magic" (NRSV, NASB, NKJV), and "sorcery" (NIV). This is a compound word *peri* + *ergos*. It has two seemingly unrelated meanings: (1) inquisitive, busybody activity; or (2) activity related to the spirit world. Of all the translations, NIV is the most interpretive calling it "sorcery." The most literal is the KJV which retains most of the etymological meaning by the rather mild and vague description "curious arts." NIV is not wrong by our understanding, but the meaning and nuance is better preserved in the KJV.

Here we see Luke (or Paul as the case may be), avoiding a pejorative term. He did not say the people practiced an evil art, merely that they practiced arts motivated by curiosity of the spirit world. Luke said they were engaged in the "busybody practices," "the curious practices," or "the inquisitive practices." This is indeed non-offensive!

The most aggressive assertion about what Paul said came from the mouth of Demetrius, Paul's opponent. <sup>26</sup>And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. <sup>27</sup>And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute

*but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship." (Acts 19:26-27, ESV).*

It is undoubtedly true that Paul's theology would not accept Ephesian idols as real gods. But the fact that this rather bald statement came from the mouth of Paul's antagonist suggests to us that such was not the way Paul spoke. Instead, that was employed by Demetrius to rile non-Christians!

**Paul's judicial hearing before Agrippa and Bernice** is instructive on how Christians should address secular powers with a different morality.

In Acts 25:13, Paul was brought before King Agrippa and Bernice as part of his trial before Festus the Roman official. *"The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room ..."* (Ac 25:23). If you were to make a contextual guess on the identity of Bernice, you would probably say she was Agrippa's queen – and you would not be wrong. She was regarded as queen. But she was really Agrippa's sister. The two were living in open incest. Before this, Bernice was the lover to General Titus who later became emperor of Rome. These going-ons were public knowledge. Now we see Paul standing under this immoral monarch to give an account of himself.

Unlike John the Baptist, Paul did not concern himself with the morality of Agrippa or Bernice. Nor did he try to defend himself. Instead, he tried to convert Agrippa! <sup>28</sup>*And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?"* <sup>29</sup>*And Paul said, "Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am — except for these chains." (Acts 26:28-29, ESV)*

Paul was not concerned with Agrippa's immorality. He was concerned with Agrippa's salvation. In this, we catch a glimpse of Paul's focus. While he would reprimand immorality in the church, he ignored immorality outside of the church. While we cannot say Acts is complete in documenting Paul's relationship with the political powers, what we observe is this: his focus was to bring the good news of forgiveness of sin to high and low. He saw Agrippa as someone who needed the redemption provided in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul was not awed by Agrippa as king and not repulsed by Agrippa as a pervert.

### Conclusion

I would like to characterize Paul's philosophy of ministry in a pagan and pluralistic world as this: Paul strove to be effective in proclaiming the Gospel to all. He was inoffensive towards other religions; and limited his interaction with political leaders to the most important task at hand, that they too would enjoy the redemption found in Christ. Consequently, *Paul's ministry was effective and inoffensive*

The fallen sinners that we are, we take pride in efforts that lead to conversion rather than give humble praise to God. This pride, hidden or not, results in a triumphalism that is offensive.

Perhaps I have lived in the west for too long and have learned to value freedom of expression more highly than the average person in Singapore. Consequently, my personal tendency is to allow for free speech even when I think that speech is wrong.

The Singapore government is a protective government. It does an excellent job in protecting Singaporeans from disruptions and tries to ensure we all make a good living. In addition, it protects us from religious discord. This has its pros and cons. It gives Christians a place to complain, and it also gives others a place to

complain against us. In Singapore, the mood is to go with the complainant.

This avenue of complaining to the government is a mixed blessing. The goal of harmony, important as it is, may overshadow even more vital aspects. In addition, the power of government to have absolute say over religion has potential dangers. Even if the government should one day adopt Christianity as a state religion, I would suggest disengagement rather than engagement with the political powers. Look at Rome's persecution of, and later support for, Christianity. It is arguable that Rome's support did more damage than Rome's persecution. Until today, many European countries adopt Christianity as a state religion. Political support resulted in an anemic faith. While others may complain against us, it is prudent for Christians to take the higher road and not complain against others. By complaining against others, we encourage political engagement in religious matters.

When we look at the issue surrounding Rony Tan, we need to be candid and ask, "Was Rony Tan really offensive? Or were the people too easily offended?" The truth can also be somewhere in between. I don't know Rony Tan, his ministry, or other teachings that may be offensive. I feel I am not able to comment meaningfully, nor is such comment necessary. Rony Tan's struggle to find the right voice calls our attention to a subject that should be close to our hearts: *How can we achieve an effective and inoffensive presentation of the Gospel?*

Even as I write, Malaysia is still going through religious tension even as Singapore's furore over Rony Tan is being resolved (perhaps?). It has been reported that the issue started the Catholic Church, which has been using "Allah" as a generic term for God, would not switch to "Tuhan," and this raised the ire of some Muslims who insist it is a term limited to their deity. They insist when Christians refer to God,

they should use the Malay term "Tuhan" rather than the Arabic term "Allah." The Malaysian Home Ministry banned the church from using "Allah." The Catholic Church took the matter to court. Their argument is that the Arabic word "Allah" was used for "god" in the generic sense and even to a specific deity before Islam existed. The Malaysian judge ruled "The applicants have the right to use the word *Allah* in the exercise of their rights to freedom of speech and expression." Incredibly, the Catholic Church won the case in a Muslim country! But the judge also granted a stay pending a challenge to her decision. So is this a vindication for the church?

While the matter is still being resolved, churches are attacked by Malaysian Muslims who are increasingly radicalized and politicized. The destruction of churches spread to the desecration of Hindu temples and mosques. These are troubling, but the worst may yet to come. Islamic parties advocating a more radicalized Islam for Malaysia can gain greater support. Any gain in the court ruling can be lost, and much more, if the Islamic parties gain greater political influence.

At the same time, I am not sure if the Catholic Church had a choice as the first move was made by the Home Ministry against them. So can or should Christians use "Allah" or just agree to use "Tuhan"?

What can we learn as Christians in Singapore? If Singapore Christians use "Allah" for God and Singapore Muslims object, what would happen? According to the provisions of the MRHA, I think the following steps will be taken. The first step could be by the Minister of Home Affairs who would make a determination who is causing the disharmony: the Christian users of "Allah" or the Muslim objectors. If he regards the cause of discord to be the Christians, he will issue a restraining order against the Christians and if he regards the cause of discord to be the Muslims, he will ask them to desist. The party so served has

the right to make written representation for itself. The Minister will refer the order to The Presidential Council for Religious Harmony for consideration and finally to the President for confirmation.

It is likely that the principal consideration in such a case would be who is "causing feelings of enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility" (MRHA III.8.1.a) between the two religious groups. When that decision is confirmed the individual who refuses to comply can be imprisoned for up to two years. This decision is extra-judicial. To date, the MRHA has not been used. Instead the government has relied on the Sedition Act [judicial] and the Internal Security Act [extra-judicial] in handling religious discord. In the case of Rony Tan, it was reported that he was confronted by officers from the Internal Security Department. So it seems the MRHA was also not used.

In times like these, a Christian in Singapore may feel the need to hunker down and desist from evangelism. That is my concern and the motivation for this article. Singapore Christians live in a political environment that is strictly monitored. Amicable religious conduct is not a religious option but a political requirement. It is almost always in the course of evangelism that we can give offense. It is easy for us to posit the false options of evangelize and offend against no evangelism and no offense.

Acts suggests to us the early Christian interaction towards the non-Christian community was not about our rights or court rulings. It was about an objective – to share the good news; and a method – effective and inoffensive. We need to recapture both objective and method. We should cultivate a winsomeness so we can fulfill that Great Commission. Our priority is effective and inoffensive witness in so far as it is possible to be inoffensive. Sometimes offense is unavoidable, but in most instances it is avoidable. Let's refocus on what really counts: *doing whatever is good*

*and necessary to bring God's forgiveness of sin to people who need it most.*

Singapore Christians should use (but not encourage) the government's insistence on inoffensive proselytism to purge ourselves of unnecessary offense and develop greater effectiveness. We have an open door before us. It so happens that the government's insistence on inoffensiveness is also the biblical principle. What "inoffensive" means may not be entirely congruent, but the principle is the same. There is much agreement in the inoffensiveness of our method. But the spreading of God's message is strictly our responsibility.

Let us be encouraged that we have a conducive environment to fulfill the Great Commission. We must not lose sight of our calling to an *effective and inoffensive witness*. Now is the time to improve our effectiveness and winsomeness. Now is the time to recall that Jesus our Lord is altogether lovely. How then should we present him?

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**Rev. Peter Eng** is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.