

*“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”*

This is not so easy to understand, isn't it? How this can be? I mean: is it really possible? For, when the seed of the Gospel is sown, it never falls into the air, it always meets the ground. Whether this ground is full of stones, thorns, the roadside or good soil, the seed of the Gospel always happens on the ground of a certain culture with its own language, traditions, rituals, music, way of dressing and way of praying... When we came here in Denmark, most of us, coming from Ghana, Korea, Germany, France or wherever you come from, this land was not empty and all of us we first met Danish culture, isn't it?

In the same way, when Paul arrived in Athens that day, he decided to have a city tour to smell and feel the atmosphere, watching, listening, feeling, seeing and understanding everything coming around. *He argued in the synagogue with the Jews but also every day, in public, with all those who were there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him.*

As we can see, when Paul arrived in Athens, he didn't find a virgin and neutral ground. He found people who think and reflect about their own culture. We hear about Stoic and Epicurean philosophers and, actually, it is very interesting for us today. Epicurean's philosophy is about finding happiness and wisdom by searching peace of mind (ataraxia). The Epicurean is a materialist guy who thinks that if you want to avoid suffering you should avoid sources of pleasure, because pleasure gives you pain when it stops. So avoid pleasure, you will avoid pain. Stoic philosophers also try to find a peaceful mind but by another way: they believe that if you want to avoid pain, you have to understand the laws of the Nature in a way to accept them. They say that we should accept what can not be changed and try to live in accordance with the Nature's Law and the Reason through the practice of meditation exercises. Epicureans and Stoics therefore follow two very different pathways to avoid suffering and find happiness.

It is true that things have changed a lot today, but I feel that, somehow, today we find these two very different ways of life. Tell me if I'm wrong, but I understand that, on one side, some people think that they will find happiness diving themselves into the surrounding culture and accepting all the pleasures they will find in it. On the other side, today Stoics will reject materialism and will denounce easy pleasures. They will try to live in accordance with the moral law as much as possible. They will reject the culture and denounce it as corrupted and dangerous. They want to separate themselves from the world with which they are in conflict in the name of their beliefs. I know many Christians who feel this world sinful and even evil. This Christians believe that God asks them to separate from it and leave this world that leads to death. So we can hear some people denouncing the modern world, globalization, capitalism, bankers, money, pleasures, consumption and so on. Culture is considered as part of the world and sin. And on the other side, in front of this attitude of disruption and denunciation, you may find the exact opposite attitude that seeks to embrace the modern world to enjoy all its pleasures. Because they were told that God loves the world, they believe that they should accept everything as if it was okay and of equal value ... Exactly in the same way of the Athenians: *Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.* They try to build a "high tech" Church with microphones, amplifiers, datashows, websites, facebook pages... A wifi 3.0 Church. The issue is to adapt Church, faith and life to the ultramodern world. A Church Samsung Galaxy S8+! This time, we are no longer in disruption but in compromise. The gospel is diluted in modernity and chasing and running behind the world with always one step late.

So... Should we choose between these two opposite attitudes? Disruption or compromise? What does the Gospel ask us if we belong to Christ?

When Paul arrived in Athens, he felt himself quickly irritated by what he saw. Paul was not upset; he was angry in front of all these idols. Like Moses coming down back from the Sinai Mountain and discovering the golden calf... And how did he react?

*He interacts in the synagogue with the Jews and worshipers of God, and the public square with all those who stood there. He also spoke with the philosophers, Epicureans and Stoics. (...)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.'* His first attitude was to observe, to listen, to interact, to try to understand before judging. It may seem banal to say but my opinion is that is somehow important enough to be noticed. Beware of too quick judgments! Listen first, try to understand, second. I know

too many people who speak too quickly actually without knowing exactly what they are talking about. Too many people want to impose their truth which is just the sum of their ignorance. First point: listen, study, try to understand before speaking and judging.

And then, in a second step, Paul seeks a place in the culture of the other so that the Gospel may be announced. *And what you worship as unknown, this is what I have, myself, to announce.* Paul even quotes the philosophers of Athens: *For in him we live and move and have our being:* this very sentence contains the belief of the followers of Plato. And Paul goes on: *And as stated by some of your own poets: For we are his race.* Paul here quotes freely the Greek poet Epimenides. The end of the verse is a quotation from the poet Aratus. So, as you can see : no disruption, no compromise. He just came where he found room for the Gospel inside the culture he found in front of him. Without seeking to destroy everything nor seek to accept everything. In a way to enter fully into the discussion, Paul enters the Greek culture he knows very well. And he discerns in it the confession of faith in the Creator God. *The God who created the universe and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth do not live in temples built by human hands and the service does not require either human hands ...*

Do you understand the subtlety of Paul's reasoning? With the prevailing culture of the Athenians he agreed to confess God the Creator who gives life, movement and existence. We are therefore of his race. Then, in a second step, he invited the Athenians to understand that it is impossible to go the other way: we do not create God with human hands (temples, rituals, cults) because we are created by him and not the reverse. So, since we are the offspring of God we belong to Christ, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like gold, silver, marble, sculpture art and imagination of man. We do not create God with our imagination. We are created by Him. What the Apostle Paul try to make the Athenians understand, is in fact that they deified their own culture, art, imagination and that is the main issue. Worse, Paul tells us that we, ALL of us, do so! *All people everywhere have to convert.* All of us, Paul said. We place on God what actually comes from our own culture. Or to say it differently, the name of God is used to justify our culture, our creations, our inventions, our traditions and our decisions. This does not mean that our culture, our creations, our inventions, our traditions and our decisions are all bad in themselves. This would fall into the trap of systematic denunciation. This is not to say that our culture, our creations, our inventions, our traditions and our decisions are all good and there is nothing to change. Far from it. This would fall into the trap of compromise. No way, all men must convert because all people (including us) believe that their culture, their creations, their inventions, their traditions and their decisions were inspired by God, willed by God, revealed by God while, actually, they are only human creations, fully human but only human.

Because here is the truth and we should say with Paul: nobody can escape from humanity. Everything we do, speak, think or create is human, fully human, purely human. Culture is human. Church is human. We have no choice with this. And Paul comes to tell us that everything is ok with that. But, in the same time, he invites us to understand that there is a great danger in thinking that our culture is divine and revealed by God, justified by the Bible. Who can prove that his own tradition, his own way of praying, of understanding Bible, Church organization, his own worship is divine? Who could prove it? Nobody. Here is the point: all of us, we idealize our culture and we deify it. Everything human is cultural: culture encompasses all that is human. But we must realize that there is a great danger in believing that culture is divine and that, therefore, it is binding on all. There is a great danger here called idolatry. Idolatry is when a human creation takes God's place. This is demonic: everything that takes God's place is demonic. All that is finite and who wants to be taken as infinite is demonic. Everything which is relative and who wants to be seen as absolute is demonic. Paul Tillich, the reformed theologian said that the demonic is what, in the culture of man, wants to take God's place.

Let us be clear: Paul does not denounce the culture because there is no human being without culture. Believing that God loves the world, it means that God loves our cultures and differences. It is even the deeper meaning of what we call the incarnation. Saying that the Word became flesh and set up his tent among us, means that God loves the world and its cultures. But as soon as we deify our culture, we create demonic idols. Paul reminds us that God is the creator of man, but that man is not the creator of God. *Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like gold, silver or marble, sculpture art and imagination of man.* Nothing that is human can declare itself divine. God alone is God and there is no God but God. From my point of view, this is the main statement of all the reformed theology. *Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.* (Ps 115:1) Soli Deo Gloria !