

Now here's the question: Do you *believe* God has the "whole world in his hands"? Some might reply, "Well, of course I do. Why else would I be here in church today?" But others might respond, "Yes, but sometimes I'm not so sure. There's so much trouble and pain in the world, including in my corner of it. Sometimes it seems as if *nobody* has the world in his or her hands." Ponder that question while we look at our Scripture reading; we'll come back to it.

In the reading, the apostle Paul finds himself in Athens, one of the most cosmopolitan centers of his day. The intellectuals of that city loved to debate and often gathered at the city forum, called the Areopagus, to do so. Paul, never one to miss an opportunity, seized the moment to present his case for the God he worshiped and served. The Athenians worshiped many gods, but didn't know much about the One, True God. They constructed many altars to various gods, but Paul noticed one altar with an inscription reading, "To an unknown god."

Paul viewed that altar as a sign of the human need to worship God, and he said, in effect, to those gathered, "This altar shows that you have the yearning to worship, but you don't know who to worship." He proceeded to tell them about the God of heaven and earth, who made the world and everything and everyone in it. Paul even quoted one of their own poets, referring to God: "In him we live and move and have our being."

In saying this, Paul asserted that not only his own life, but also the lives of the Athenians, were in God's hands. "In him we live and move and have our being," is just another way of saying, "God's got the whole world in his hands."

If we wanted to express this in a contemporary context, let's think about the apostle Paul showing up in a Times Square Starbucks. What do you suppose Paul would say if he showed up in New York City? What if Paul started teaching and preaching inside a coffee house, while handing out mocha lattes? It might sound something like this:

"Americans, I see how extremely religious you are, in every way. I have observed that many of you say, 'I'm spiritual, but not religious.' I'm aware how increasing numbers of you never cross the threshold of a church, but spend hours browsing religious books on Amazon. Many of you wear crosses around your necks, but hardly know why. You finger them in moments of fear or anxiety and feel vaguely comforted. You sit at home, channel-

surfing the televangelists and religious talk shows, hoping to glean some spiritual comfort, but you never linger long enough to submit yourselves to their teachings. You have an insistent curiosity about things religious, and vow that one day you will do something about it. But somehow you never find the time...you just never find the time."

The religious or spiritual impulse is a significant clue to the reality of God in our world and God's sovereignty over it. In varying degrees, we all have that same hunger, although we may be more aware of it at some times and seasons of our lives than at others. We may or may not have pursued it, but this "will to believe" (to use William James' expression) can help us to know the One who has "the whole world in his hands."

Some things to consider. *There's no proof.* There's nothing whatsoever in the way of scientific proof one way or the other to prove or disprove the proposition that the world is in God's hands. Although such discussions can be interesting and perhaps, for some, even persuasive, ultimately, whether you're evangelist Billy Graham or anti-theist Christopher Hitchens, there's just no incontrovertible proof that holds up under the scrutiny of the scientific rules of evidence. But seeking proof in order to believe may be the wrong way round.

What we know, we know by faith. The affirmation that the whole world is in God's hands is a conclusion reached by faith, not by incontrovertible data as science understands data and evidence. But that doesn't make the conclusion any less reasonable. Frank Schaeffer, in his book *Crazy for God*, points out that whether we are secular or religious, we all make our biggest life-shaping decisions by faith. Schaeffer said, "You would have to live a lifetime to be qualified to make any big decisions." And since we can't do that, "we make a leap of faith when it comes to what we should believe in, who we will marry and our careers."

He goes on to say, "Who we happen to meet, one conversation when you were eighteen, the college course you happened to sign up for, the teacher you liked, the elevator you missed and the girl you met in the next one, decide whole lives....Only the trivialities - say, buying cars, washing machines or airline seats - are chosen on the basis of good information.... I've always known I like aisle seats, but what does one really want in a wife?"

Trusting God, then, is a choice. Choosing a spouse, picking a career path, believing in God - there's a huge leap of faith involved. What it comes down to is that trusting God is a choice. Mature faith is not so much a feeling as it is a decision. We'll always have enough evidence to make a leap of faith as well as to *not* make that leap. One way or the other, we have to choose who to follow and who to serve.

This choice is not about overcoming doubt or having all questions answered. It's about knowing or having a conviction that the ultimate answers to life are known by God, and only by God. We can learn a lot, know a lot, understand much; we can come to terms with, we can accept a lot; but ultimate, full, all-comprehending knowledge is beyond our pay grade. We live on a "need to know" basis, and we've got to be comfortable with that. Some things are for God and God alone to know.

Lord knows that there are so many struggles and crises in our lives that we sometimes feel that *nobody* has the world in-hand, nobody is at the wheel steering the ship. We have so many questions that we often seem to be wandering in circles. But the Lord knows us, too, and says to us, "Come unto me. I am the Alpha and Omega. I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. You need not wander or wonder. You know me. And I will be with you always, even unto the end of the age."

So, our conviction that the world is in God's hands is totally plausible and rational, a belief that springs from the very core of our being. We know that "In [God] we live and move and have our being."

Prayer: Source of all creation, maker of the world and everything in it, you are never far from each one of us. We come into your house seeking you, O giver of life and breath. Reveal yourself to us; dwell with us; and abide in us. We live because of you. We hope because of you. In the name of Jesus Christ in whom we live, and the Spirit of Truth who abides in us, amen.

Sources:

- Collins, Ace. "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands. " *Ministry Matters*, October 17, 2013, ministrymatters.com, Retrieved October 27, 2016.
- "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands. " *Wikipedia*.
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- Schaeffer, Frank. *Crazy for God*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2007, 102.

The Whole World in His Hands

Sunday, May 21, 2017

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Acts 17:22-31

Chainsmokers. If you think this is a reference to people who smoke two packs of cigarettes a day, you're right. But if you think this is a reference to an American singing duo whose music genres include EDM, electro house, progressive house, trap and future bass, you are also correct and clearly in tune with the pop culture music world.

The Chainsmokers (Andrew Taggart and Alex Pall) had a top-20 single in several countries with their 2014 song "#Selfie" which reached No. 16 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100, No. 3 in Australia, and No. 11 in the United Kingdom. They released their debut album, *Bouquet*, in October 2015. Their following singles, "Roses" and "Don't Let Me Down," reached the top 10 on the Billboard Hot 100, while "Closer" became their first No. 1 single on the chart and was in this position as recently as November 2016.

The Billboard Chart tracks many styles of music, usually as separate genres, but occasionally a song crosses over and leaps to the top of the multiple charts. For example, in 1969 the gospel song "Oh Happy Day" by the Edwin Hawkins Singers reached No. 3 on the Billboard Hot 100 singles chart, and in 1971 "Put Your Hand in the Hand (of the Man)" by Ocean peaked at No. 2 on the same chart.

Only one gospel song has ever reached No. 1 on a U.S. pop singles chart, however: that song was "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," as recorded by a young British boy named Laurie London (he was 14 in 1958) and accompanied by the Geoff Love Orchestra.

In April 1958, London's rendition of the song reached No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart and remained there for four weeks. In the United States, it became the most successful record by a British male artist in the 1950s, and it sold over a million copies. The Record Industry Association of America awarded the song a gold disc; but for all the early hype, and even though London went on to make other recordings, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" was his only hit record.