

The Whole World in God's Hands

By Sr. Pastor Emeritus Gaylord Hatler

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First Christian Church, Colorado Springs

What do you think of when you hear the term "Chainsmokers?"

If you think this is a reference to people who smoke one or two packs a day, you're right.

But if you think this is a reference to an American singing duo whose music genres are widely varied 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" reaching #16 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100, #3 in Australia, and #11 in the United Kingdom. Last week they had the #1 hit on the Billboard Hot 100, "Something Just Like This with Coldplay. #2 was "That's What I Like" with Bruno Mars. #3 was "It Ain't Me" with Kygo and Selena Gomez.

Billboard also tracks gospel music as a separate genre, but occasionally a gospel song crosses over and leaps to the top of the pop charts. For example, in 1969 "Oh Happy Day" by the Edwin Hawkins Singers reached #3 on the Billboard Hot 100 singles chart, and in 1971 "Put Your Hand in the Hand (of the

Man)" by Ocean peaked at #2 on the same chart.

*Only one gospel song has ever reached #1* on a U.S. pop singles chart, however, and it was in 1958. Toss this question at the audience and allow some guesses. It was "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," as recorded by a young British boy named Laurie London (he was only 14 in 1958), accompanied by the Geoff Love Orchestra.

In April 1958, London's rendition of the song reached #1 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart and remained there for four weeks. In the United States, it was the most successful record by a British male in the 1950s, and it sold over a million copies. It was awarded a gold disc by the Record Industry Association of America that same year. For all that, and though London went on to make other recordings, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" was his only hit record.

It was perhaps ironic that a Brit would have the breakthrough on that song, because it's a song with U.S. roots and had been in use in the American Christian scene for several years before it hit #1. Depending on which origin story you believe, the song either arose from the slave fields of the American South, or it was written by a certain Obie Philpot during his service in the U.S. military during World War II. (He died in 2013 at the age of 91. One source says he was a full-blooded Cherokee.)



Rodin's sculpture, "The Hand of God" says something about that creative communion between God and humankind. God's hand is massive and strong; there is a sense in which it is that hand which has ultimate control. For 13.7 billion years that "hand" has shaped creation and us as part of it. Do you notice the creature cradled in God's hand appears to be in a fetal position, as if it is still in the womb? The creature formed

by the hand of God appears to be fluid; it looks as though this human life shifts and moves within the hand of God and as it does, the hand which holds this creature, adjusts and shapes it as the creature shapes itself.

### **Do you believe?**

But 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 this day?"

But others might respond, "Yes, I'm here, 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 hands."

Let's leave that right there while we look at our Scripture reading, but we'll come back to it.

As we follow Paul on this missionary journey we learn he's traveled far, stirred up trouble with his preaching in many places, sometimes requiring a late-night departure. He's changed his team from Barnabas to Silas and Timothy. He's been preaching for several days in the synagogue and in the market place while waiting for his new team to join him. He came to the attention of a group of philosophers who invited him to attend a regular meeting of the city's leading philosophers. He has noticed in his meanderings in Athens that there are many altars to idols in the city. One even had the inscription "to an unknown god."

Paul viewed that altar as a sign of a 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 introduce them to the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus. To tell them about the God of heaven and earth, who made the world and everything -- and everyone -- in it. He even quoted two of their own poets,

referring to God: "In him we live and move and have our being," and "for we, too, are His offspring."

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, "He's got the whole world in his hands."

Perhaps you understand this intuitively because there's something in your heart that wants to connect with Something or Someone bigger than you.

### **The apostle in Starbucks**

But to express it in a contemporary context, let's think about the apostle Paul showing up in New York City on May 21, 2017. He would wander around the city, much as he did in Athens. He observes both the sparkling and the seamy sides of that cosmopolitan center. We settles into a Times Square Starbucks. What do you suppose Paul would say if he showed up New York City? What if he undertook his teaching not on the brow of a Greek hill surrounded by temples, but inside a Starbucks, handing out mocha lattes all around?

"Americans, I see how extremely religious you are, in every way," Paul might begin. But instead of speaking of temples to unknown gods, he might say something like this: "I have

observed how many of you are fond of saying, 'I'm spiritual, but not religious.' I'm aware how increasing numbers of you never cross the threshold of a church or synagogue or even a mosque, but spend hours browsing religious books at Barnes & Noble. 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."

Every culture I've ever heard about has a religion and a concept of a god, or gods, to be appeased, feared or worshipped.

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, most of us 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 who has "the whole world in his hands."

### **Things to consider**

*There's no proof.* Nothing whatsoever in the way of scientific proof one way or the other. Can't prove or disprove the proposition that "he's got the whole world in his hands." It's just not that kind of conversation. Although such discussions can be interesting and perhaps, for some, even persuasive, ultimately, whether you're Billy Graham or Christopher Hitchens, there's just no incontrovertible proof that holds up under the scrutiny of the scientific rules of evidence.

*What we know, we know by faith.* The affirmation that God has "the whole world in his hands" is a conclusion reached by faith, not by incontrovertible data as science understands data and evidence. But that doesn't make the conclusion 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 is a choice.* Okay, choosing God requires a huge leap of faith. 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, it's a choice.

*The fourth thing to consider is that it's not about overcoming doubt* or having all questions answered. Even Jesus on the most difficult day of his life had doubt when he said, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me!" That is the moment when I can most clearly identify with Jesus. It is that horrific moment in his brief life where I find hope for me. I have learned, more times than I can count, it is not about what I can prove scientifically about God. It is about knowing or having a conviction that the ultimate answers to life are known by God -- and only by God. Yes, we can know a lot. We can understand, 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.

But our conviction that "he's got the whole world in his hands" is totally plausible and rational -- a belief that springs from the

very core of our being. We know that, as the apostle Paul reminds us in this text, "In him we live and move and have our being."

Lord knows that there are so many struggles and crises in our lives that we sometimes feel *nobody* has the world in his hands. Nobody is at the wheel. We have so many questions that we often seem to be wandering in circles.

The final verse of chapter 17, in part, reads this way: "When they heard of the resurrection, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' In other words, they said, "Very interesting. I need to think about this for a few days. I'll be getting back to you." That seems to be a nonresponse to me. It appears they went away and never got back to Paul because there is no recorded letter from Paul to the church at Athens.

What is your response today? If your response is, yes, I believe God's got the whole world in his hands, there is work for you to do. There are hungry people who need to be fed. There are injustices that need to be remedied. There are homeless people who need housing. There are people whose lives scream out to us, "I need a friend." How will you answer both the question and the call?

Amen.