

## “Apologies”

### Sermon – May 10, 2026 Stone Presbyterian Church

---

Impiety—that is, lack of reverence or respect for god or gods—and corruption of youth. Those were the charges against the Greek philosopher Socrates at his trial in 399 BC.

The trial took place in Athens, the birthplace of democracy a couple of centuries earlier. By the time of Socrates, though, things were starting to fray, including some disastrous wars.

The charge of impiety was him “failing to acknowledge the gods of the city” and “introducing new deities.” Socrates had some novel thoughts.

The charge of “corrupting the youth” was him encouraging his students to think critically, challenge traditional Athenian authorities, and question the democratic norms.

He argued the ruling was a skill that required expert knowledge, not a popularity contest.

He believed democracy easily falls to demagogues—leaders who manipulate emotions to gain power rather than promoting the common good.

He was narrowly convicted but then, by a wider margin, perhaps because he was unrepentant, he was sentenced to death by drinking a mixture containing poison hemlock.

His students offered accounts of the trial and execution and defense of Socrates, the most famous from his student Plato called, “*Apologia Socratis*” or in English “The Apology of Socrates.” Because back then “apology” meant a “speech in defense.”

And it kept that meaning even into English up until Billy Shakespeare started playing around with it. Until it had the sense we have today of being sorry.

Today’s first lesson from the Acts of the Apostles chapter 17 finds Paul in Athens about 450 years after Socrates. The democracy of Greece had

## “Apologies”

### Sermon – May 10, 2026 Stone Presbyterian Church

---

been replaced by the imperial rule of Rome in the previous century.

Nonetheless, Athens still became the “intellectual capital” of the empire, which today’s passage from Acts 17 alludes to.

In that midst, Paul is trying to give an apology, a defense, for beliefs that echo those of Socrates for which he was executed.

Notably, this is the only major speech in the book of Acts addressing a polytheistic audience, that is foreigners who worship multiple gods.

As renown Biblical storyteller and scholar Philip Ruge-Jones says,

“No other passage of the New Testament more explicitly puts on display the challenge of an apologist: how does the faith flowering in this new movement relate to beliefs in the world around it, especially beyond the Jewish soil in which The Way’s first green blade appeared?”

The approach Paul uses is something worth imitating. He first finds common ground, then shows them a different interpretation using their own words, and then at the end introduces a novel concept.

Specifically, he first acknowledges they are religious. That is, they are a people of faith. But he also points out their unsuredness, since they have an altar “to an unknown god.” In other words, they want to cover all the bases, even if they don’t know what that might be.

Paul uses that to say he knows who that “unknown god” is—it’s the God who made all creation, including human beings. Thus, that God cannot be contain in a manmade idol or shrine, even one made of gold.

Further, in verse 26 Paul says, “From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth.” In other words, all people are God’s people.

There is no differentiation between the church and others.

Up to this point, Paul’s audience probably can at least appreciate the logic of his argument. Then Paul drops his twist: God raised a man from the

## **“Apologies”**

### **Sermon – May 10, 2026 Stone Presbyterian Church**

---

dead who will someday judge in righteousness. Thus, everyone should repent.

Repent for not seeking, not paying attention to the God in whom we live, move, and have our being. Particularly, we are exhorted to repent from the human inventions we worship in place of God. Finally, the end of the vision is justice, brought about through Jesus, the man attested by God through resurrection.

Repentance refers to a change in mind, which leads to a change in mind set and behavior. People must change their mind, because God has selected the resurrected Jesus as the one who will judge people by the standard of justice. Justice is the bar. The assurance or reason that one can trust that justice is God’s goal is evidenced by how God responded to Jesus the Just One, who was executed unjustly. Namely, that God raised him from the dead. And will us also.

Paul preaches about a God who resurrects bodies. To the Athenians this resurrection from the dead into a new living body is the opposite of their belief that the pure eternal soul is trapped in the contemptible body and released—freed—at death.

Unfortunately, far too many Christians continue to think that they should despise their bodily existence, that nothing matters but going to heaven someday.

If we read the end of the chapter 17 in the next few verses, we would see that some of the people did mock Paul, others promised to hear him again, and still others “joined him and believed”. So goes the proclamation of the Gospel! No guarantees.

As C. Clifton Black, professor of theology at Princeton seminary says, “This side of paradise, in a world whose redemption is assured though not yet

## “Apologies”

### Sermon – May 10, 2026 Stone Presbyterian Church

---

consummated, witnesses to Christ learn to live in unresolved tension. Everywhere is ambiguity.”

And that is the problem. People don’t like ambiguity, particularly in an uncertain world. But Jesus didn’t come to give us a set of rules that you follow and you’re good. He came so that our hearts might be changed so that we do the will of God organically and joyfully.

The epistle lesson today is also an “apology”. For the fifth and final time this Easter season we hear from 1 Peter. Today’s passage from chapter 3 charges us to prepare an “apology”, a defense to anyone for our faith. But we need to remember, the audience of 1 Peter in Asia Minor were the minority with very little power or money to change things, let alone challenge the dominant Empire. Thus, they can do little more than to be good followers of Christ, following in his footsteps. Do the acts Christ did while being willing to suffer for doing them and believing in Christ. Instead of responding in like manner to harsh treatment, Christians are to sanctify—to set apart or consecrate—Christ in their hearts as Lord. In contrast, Christians today are often on the side of the Empire. At a minimum Christianity is the dominant religion culturally in the U.S., so those saying they are being persecuted for their Christian beliefs needs to be carefully examined.

Are they upset because they want to impose their dogma and beliefs on others, like the Roman Empire wanted to?

Or instead, are they being castigated for defending the poor, the hungry, the stranger, for having “toxic empathy”?

1 Peter tells we follow Christ’s example because we have hope. The hope held out is that honorable behavior will in the end put to shame those

## “Apologies”

### Sermon – May 10, 2026 Stone Presbyterian Church

---

who slander. Maybe not immediately, but over time, like the plant that pushes up eventually through the concrete.

In today’s world where many people are becoming more skeptical and derisive of American Christianity, we need not give apologies in the modern sense of expressing regrets but rather give apologies in the original *apologia* sense by words and actions—both to them and to Christians whose allegiance are to political power and not Christ.

The gospel passage from John 14 gives us that *apologia*: namely, that because we love Christ, we will love one another. Love is the essential bond connecting believers to God and each other. Those who love Jesus must do good works of love. And authentic love is not passive; it is active and demonstrative. Jesus highlights that faith devoid of love is incomplete. In John's gospel, faith is a relationship with a living being, with people, \*now\*, in day-to-day living, making lives better.

This active participation in God’s love leads to the renewal of society, demonstrating through both word and deed of Christ’s enduring presence and active reign in the lives of believers and the world around them through the power of the Holy Spirit.

As clergyman and peace activist William Coffin said, “If we fail in love, we fail in all things else.” Apology accepted.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.  
Amen.