

## **Reaching the lost at Athens**

### **Acts 17:16-34**

#### **Preface**

The original author of this book is Clifford Pond who has spent many years in pastoral and radio ministry. It helps us a great deal with the task of bringing the gospel of Christ to people who have no idea who he is, nor any knowledge of the content of the Bible. Clifford made this book available for us to use when he recorded a number of talks for the Serving Today radio programme on reaching the ‘un-churched.’ Clifford first produced this book a number of years ago and Andrew Cook has helpfully made some revisions for us. We are grateful to both Clifford and Andrew for their valuable contribution.

If we become better communicators of the gospel to our unbelieving world then the purpose of this book will have met its aim.

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#### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In his sermon to the Areopagus (also known as Mars Hill), Paul did not begin by teaching a new version of a psalm; he did not open with prayer; he did not announce a text; he did not even quote from a single Scripture during the whole of his sermon! Instead, he quoted an unbelieving poet! What is your reaction to that? Some say Paul made a mistake; he

should not have done what he did. We will deal with that comment in more detail later. For the moment note that Luke, the writer of the Acts of the Apostles, gives no indication that he is giving a bad example of gospel preaching.

Others ignore what Paul did because they have a preconceived idea of what gospel preaching is, and see no need to study how the apostles preached. But surely, has not the Holy Spirit given this example of apostolic communication for our instruction? So we must ask: ‘Why does Paul’s sermon at the Areopagus surprise us?’

In this booklet, we will follow Paul as he comes to the great city of Athens. We shall see that Paul was following exactly the principles established by God in human communication.

#### **Chapter 2: Background**

Firstly, Paul had a clear message. He knew what he had to say. On the Damascus Road he saw the Lord (Acts 26: 13-18). From that moment he had one burning passion, to make Christ known. Communicating the gospel starts with this. We will not make the right impact on our society unless we have first been overwhelmed with a sight of the Lord’s glory.

Secondly, as Paul entered Athens he took with him all his past experiences: his birth, his education, his past persecution of the church. All *our* natural and spiritual

experiences will tend to influence the way we communicate. In a special sense, a Christian communicator is a prepared person. Our knowledge of the Bible and our personal experiences of life shape our communication of the gospel.

### **Chapter 3: Important first Impressions**

When Paul came to Athens he walked around observing the city (see verses 16 & 22). From history we know that he saw a beautiful city. For example, we are told that the Parthenon was an example of architectural beauty, power and splendour. It was a centre of learning. Bishop J.C.Ryle, a well-known pastor from the nineteenth century, wrote in his book 'The Upper Room':

*"In proportion to its size, it very likely contained the most learned, civilised, philosophical, highly educated, artistic, intellectual population on the face of the globe."*

Yet it was an idolatrous city. Its worship was corrupt, deceitful and immoral. It is true that the temples and idols reflected the art forms of the day, but they also reflected the moral decadence of the people. As we shall see, Paul's observation of these things was not superficial. He saw the wrong thinking behind these objects of beauty. For him, this was evidence that pagan philosophy led to corruption.

Before attempting to communicate to people ourselves, we also need to open our eyes and ears. We need to know the

context into which we are speaking. It is possible for us to walk around our towns mixing with people, and yet thinking that if we have ourselves seen God's glory, this ought to blind us to the repulsive moral and spiritual decay around us. Paul does not go around with his eyes closed. At Athens, two things that he saw affected him: the sight of the Lord's glory and the sight of man's corruption. Paul's inner feelings about what he saw in the city are described by the same word 'provoked' that the Greek version of the Old Testament uses to describe God's anger in the face of Israel's idolatry (Deuteronomy 9:18; Psalm 106:29). Paul was a man after God's own heart. He was profoundly disturbed by the shocking violation of God's glory in the monstrous idols he saw.

We too need to open our eyes to the sickening sights of the world around us: its arts, its music and its drama. We need to be hurt by its corruption, its moral weakness, its violence, its pain and its ignorance.

How far should we go with such studies? The exercise could be very time consuming. Therefore, our time and energies must be disciplined. We must allow some time at least for exposure to the world around us. We need to speak to ordinary people, to be aware of the newspapers they read and the ways they think.

It is true that exposure to the world could be spiritually harmful so we must be on our guard against this. Job found it necessary to *"make a covenant with his eyes"* (Job 31:1). If we begin to enjoy the world instead of being

scandalised by it, we had best put our eyes out (Matthew 5:29). We must not sin! But it is tragic if we are not able to make the observations necessary for us to understand the culture and thought patterns of those with whom we communicate. Should we not seek the spiritual strength the apostles had? We have such a responsibility, as communicators. If we are unable to discover anything about those we want to reach, God will make up for our ignorance by giving us unusual wisdom. But we have no right to ask God to make up for deliberate neglect of our responsibility, where we *are* able to study our audience.

#### **Chapter 4: Basic Principles**

So far we have researched the context of the communication task. Now we must approach the task itself. Where shall we begin? How shall we begin?

At Athens, Paul began in the Jewish Synagogue (verse 17). He also moved out into the market place (verse 17). Then he found himself in the debating society known as the Areopagus (verse 19). This may seem to be a very natural progression. The fact is that Paul is using a deliberate strategy, consistent with sound principles of communication. Paul did not assume that what he did in other places was the right thing to do in Athens. He was not controlled by his temperament or by tradition. Nor did he directly attack the corruption of Athens. The word 'so' or 'therefore' at the beginning of verse 17 is important. Paul saw - he was moved. Therefore he acted in a certain

way. His actions were based on his research, rather than preconceived ideas that 'always work'.

Too often we fail to work out a strategy based on biblical principles. We do what others do: we are either traditionalists or lovers of the latest novelty. If we always have open-air meetings, or we always distribute tracts, or we always have house meetings, etc., we are failing to follow biblical principles. Each situation requires a carefully planned approach.

#### **Chapter 5: Where to Begin**

The reason for Paul beginning in the Jewish Synagogue is obvious to find. The Jews and Jewish followers knew God's special revelation, the Old Testament part of the Bible. From this starting point, Paul was able to show that Jesus Christ fulfilled their expectation of a Messiah (Acts 17:1-4). In this, Paul was following sound principles of communication. He began with those with whom he related most closely. He spoke their 'language', and they understood him.

It makes sense for us to begin with our 'in church' situation. Here we can use the Bible as our textbook. We must be careful not to make too many assumptions about the understanding of our congregation. But we can normally expect a general familiarity with the language of the Bible. Evangelism within our local church must be the sensible place to begin. There will be children of Christian parents. Other people will have been brought into the

church community by personal contact or through a church outreach activity. In theory, and often in practice, in the providence of God these are the people most easily evangelised. The more we have in common with our hearers, the more effective our communication will be.

### **Chapter 6: Widening our Vision.**

Paul also went to the people outside the synagogue. Each day he reasoned with people in the market place. It is not entirely clear who these people were, but it seems what happened in the market place was a result of his work in the synagogue.

We too must look for our work to have an effect in the world around. We may have opportunity to visit someone who has heard us speak. Or news of our message may provoke discussion in a home or club. We may provoke reaction by writing in the local newspaper or being interviewed on the local radio. The stone has been dropped into the pool and the ripples are beginning to flow. In this new situation what should our approach be?

The people in the market caught the main points of Paul's message: *"The good news about Jesus and the resurrection."* This was consistent with the great themes he had dealt with in the synagogue. But to Gentile people, this made no sense. It sounded like nonsense about foreign gods.

So how did Paul deal with this situation? The report in Acts 17 does not give us a detailed answer but later in 1

Corinthians 9:19-23, Paul laid down the principles on which he acted.

*"Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings."*

Paul did not do 'mass evangelism' in large arenas. He treated each situation and each person according to their culture, the level of their understanding and the language they could grasp. Paul clearly demonstrates this when he finds himself at the Areopagus.

### **Chapter 7: A Different Approach**

Even the most casual reader of Paul's address to the Areopagus realises that here is a very different approach from Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). It also appears to be in contrast to Paul's gospel statements in his epistles. This contrast is so great that some people have concluded Paul made a mistake at the Areopagus. They

turn to 1 Corinthians 2:2 *“For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified”* and say that Paul is implying: “I was wrong at Athens and I have learnt my lesson. In future I will always preach Christ and him crucified.”

To accuse Paul of changing his essential message to suit the Athenian hearers is a serious charge. It is saying Paul was guilty of reducing his message. If that was true, Paul should not just change his tactics: he should confess that he sinned at Athens. It is equally serious to say that Paul was determined to leave aside other truths when preaching at Corinth because of special circumstances there. In 1 Corinthians 2:2, Paul is *not* expressing a determination to reduce his message. He is expressing a determination not to allow his message to become confused by rhetoric or human philosophy. As we shall see, Paul at the Areopagus is not indulging in either of these. What he says in 1 Corinthians 2:2 is completely consistent with his Areopagus address!

1 Corinthians 2:2 does not imply that Paul preached the atonement at the very outset of every address. His address to the Areopagus as recorded in Acts 17 is not the whole of what he would say, but rather an introductory statement to engage with a pagan audience. Later, in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Paul explains his approach to people in different situations and with differing cultural backgrounds. But he is not contradicting in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 what he wrote

in 1 Corinthians 2:2. This applies to all Christian witness. As Dr.D.Martin Lloyd-Jones says on Matthew 7, verse 6,

*“We must learn how to assess different types and persons, and we must learn to discriminate between person and person. There is nothing so pathetic or so unscriptural as a mechanical way of testifying to others. There are some Christians who are guilty of that. They witness and testify, but they do it in a thoroughly mechanical way. They never really consider the person with whom they are dealing, they never try to assess the person or try to discover exactly where he is or what his position is; they fail completely to implement this exhortation. They present the truth in exactly the same way to all and sundry. Now, quite apart from the fact that their testifying is generally quite useless, and that the only thing they achieve is to give themselves a great feeling of self-righteousness because they have been doing this, it is I say, utterly unscriptural.”*

So why did Paul use a distinctive approach in his Areopagus address?

### **Chapter 8: The Reason for being Different**

Paul adopted his Areopagus approach because his audience was composed entirely of people without the Bible. And his approach to this situation is of vital importance to us in our task in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In his book ‘Death in the City’

the Christian thinker and philosopher, Francis Schaeffer wrote:

*“In three different places, Paul speaks solely to men without the Bible. The first is at Lystra (Acts 14:15-17) where the message was fragmentary because it was interrupted. The second is to the Areopagus (Acts 17:16-32) where he has a longer speech but one that was broken off. Third is Romans 1:18-2:16 where he can develop his argument at ease. We can see here what he was really saying in all three places, for the other two conform to this early section in Romans.”*

Schaeffer went on to say:

*“Here, I believe, is where God gives us the method of preaching to our generation, for our generation is largely made up of men without the Bible. How are you going to start talking to them?”*

In Acts 17 Paul addressed Epicureans and Stoics. Epicureans believed the world came into being by the chance combination of atomic particles. They had no fear of divine intervention in their lives. They had no fear of punishment after death. Indeed, they did not believe in life after death. So they advocated living this life to the full: eat, drink and be merry because this life is all! According to them, everything is a matter of luck.

For Stoics the cause of all things was Universal Reason. Everything happens at the dictate of this power. Nothing can change what is to be. So they tried to adapt themselves to the inevitable. They suppressed their feelings and submitted themselves to what they could not change. Everything was governed by fate. Luck and fate also sum up the thinking of people today. Our life, they say, is governed by the interpretation of nature called evolution, which in itself gives rise either to belief in luck or fate, or a strange mix of the two.

How are we going to start talking to similar people today? It is a common experience that whenever an attempt is made to reach the ‘unchurched’ of our society, the tendency is for the evangelist to move away from biblical foundations so, evangelicals become immersed in social welfare, psychological therapy, political action, etc., at the expense of a clear gospel. So, as one writer asks:

*“How is the divine word to be communicated to spiritually blind people for them to understand without losing its divine character?”*

Schaeffer asks the further question:

*“Are you going to quote from the Bible even if they do not know anything about it – or if they despise or ignore it or do not know its authority?”*

Then he points to the answer:

*“Paul did not! ... From Romans 1:18 to Romans 2:16 he does not once quote from the Old Testament. When he begins to talk to the Jew, however, after 2:17, he does quote from the scripture, because the Jews knew what the Bible was. But in the first part, where he talks to the Greek, the man without the Bible, he talks to him in a different way. And I repeat: I believe with all my heart that we can learn from this the method of preaching to our generation.”*

We can see the same pattern back in the Old Testament book of Amos. The prophecy begins with messages to the nations surrounding Israel. None of them were familiar with the Law of Moses or God’s covenant with Israel, so none of these things are mentioned. The appeal is entirely to the witness of their conscience. (Amos 1:3–2:3). But when the prophet goes on to address the people of Judah and Israel, his appeal is to the law and to God’s dealings with his people. (Amos 2:4-16).

This is a most important principle. To always use the same method or approach, no matter whom we are addressing, will not do. It is unbiblical. At the Areopagus and in Romans 1:18-2:16, Paul is following the pattern set by Jesus Christ himself, see for example John 4:1-26.

### **Chapter 9: Linking with our Hearers**

It is vital to catch the attention of our audience. The city of Athens was steeped in idolatry and Paul’s starting point

was the altar “... *to an unknown god*”. Among the idols and altars Paul singles out this one as a means of relating to his audience. Nowadays we may not be confronted with an altar to an unknown god, but what this altar represented and the reason for Paul’s starting at this point will provide the guidance we need. The evangelist Michael Green speaks of ‘*letting the world choose the agenda*’. But Green also says that Paul started from the felt need of the hearers. I would rather say that Paul began at a point where human emptiness is exposed. These Athenians had their great philosophical heritage; they had their own ideas about the world; and yet they made allowance for a gap in their knowledge. They were forced to do this because their own ideas did not satisfy them completely. However, it cannot be said that they were searching for God. They were not, although their way of trying to find complete satisfaction happened to be religious in form. Paul does not use the altar to an unknown god to prove a supposed hungering for God on the part of those people. The Athenians believed in many different gods, and they had to pacify the gods whom they were so fearful of offending. Superstitious fear is one thing; hunger for the one true God is quite different. The Bible does not address a human natural desire for God; instead, it says that men and women are under judgement because “*There is no fear of God before their eyes*” (Romans 3:18).

As we look around us we see many examples of the emptiness of life without God. Sometimes this will be some form of religion – perhaps even Christianised

religion, or in the popularity of a sect or other religion. Emptiness of life may also be seen in other things such as drink, drugs, gambling, etc., or more subtle forms of escapism such as obsession with work, pleasure or family. Some writers have suggested that by making a pagan altar his starting point, Paul makes the difference between Christianity and paganism less clear. The response of his audience however, shows they understood that his message was different. When Paul says: *“I see that in every way you are very religious”* (verse 22), it is possible he is commending their zeal, but he doesn’t approve of what their zeal leads them to. When he says: *“I ... observed your objects of worship”* (verse 23), he means their idols. Paul is not commending them for idolatry, but rather, is expressing the indignation he felt (shown in verse 16; see also Romans 1:25; Acts 14:14 and 2 Thessalonians 2:4).

When Paul calls them ‘religious’ (older versions of the Bible use: ‘superstitious’) he is not commending their religion, but describing the ability to worship, as God intended when he created human beings, but is now distorted in the Athenians by sin. Paul is disgusted! The theologian F.F. Bruce comments:

*“What was piety to the Greeks was superstition in the eyes of the apostle.”*

Paul’s starting point did relate to something that showed the cultural and moral life of the community. The many altars and shrines were objects of great artistic beauty, but

they were not acceptable to Paul. They were places of gross immorality in the name of religion.

The culture and morals of a community are on the surface, and underneath that are the deeper thoughts of the people. Culture can be the point of contact, the common ground between the evangelist and the people. Many well-meaning Christians have realised this fact, but their message has remained at the level of culture and morals. Culture and morals were not the substance of Paul’s address; they were only his starting point.

Around us is a culture and a morality that shows much evidence of the goodness of God, and yet also the ungodliness of the people. In going to unbelievers today, we must be able to use, as our starting point, the popular songs of our day; the miseries of our society; the arts; the pleasures; anything that enables us to show the confusion that arises when men and women’s minds are blind to the true meaning and purpose of life given to us by God.

Paul’s starting point gave him a shortcut to bring the Athenians face to face with the fact that they were breaking God’s law. He did not begin with a story to make people listen, nor with a humorous allusion to put them in the right mood. He did not even begin with a parable. He began with a real example from their life that exposed their folly and led on immediately to their relationship with God.

### **Chapter 10: Making the Message Relevant**

So, we have caught the attention of our audience. What is the next consideration? Many evangelical preachers of the

beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century would say: “We must contextualise.” Some will approve, while others will despair depending on what is understood by contextualisation. In liberal theology, liberation theology and some ‘evangelical’ theology, the message is amended to suit the cultural context, or even the fashion of the hour, for example, ‘Christian liberty’ becomes freedom from having to obey Scripture, for liberals; freedom from political domination for liberationists; freedom from poverty for well informed evangelicals.

Did Paul contextualise? Let us imagine what he might have done. He might have said:

*“Now, I have to agree with you that God is a great mystery. He is so mysterious that it is impossible for us to be sure what he is like. I share your agnostic view, but I would like to tell you about Jesus of Nazareth. Many of us feel that he was so good that God – if there is a god – must be something like him.”*

Or Paul might have said:

*“You Athenians have a wonderful reputation for scientific research. You have thought deeply about the mysteries of life. I feel those of you who suggest that the world is the result of a lucky chance must be right. But on the other hand, it makes sense to believe that behind everything there is a mind. So let’s agree that a supreme mind – we’ll call him God – made the*

*first particles. Then he let the whole thing work out from there.”*

Perhaps, it is better as H.J.Appleby argues in his booklet ‘All this for the sake of the gospel’, to speak of transposition rather than contextualisation; that is, presenting the Bible’s message, which is never out of date, in a form that is capable of being understood by the audience. We must be understood, but the message is not to be reduced nor changed to make it more understandable. Transposition retains the exactness of the message, but requires hard work to find ways of making it understood.

Nowhere do we see more clearly the need for God’s revelation than in Athens. It was the cultural and intellectual centre of the world of its time. There was learning and culture of the highest order but its people were in gross spiritual darkness. So Paul spoke from God’s revealed truth. As F.F.Bruce puts it:

*“While the wording and citations of the speech are Hellenistic, the emphases are thoroughly biblical.”*

Although there are no Bible verses in the Areopagus address, this must not lead us to think the address is not based on the Bible. It contradicts Greek philosophy at every point and is founded squarely on revealed truth, and is full of Bible doctrine.

## **Chapter 11: Maintaining a Biblical Perspective**

Paul's basic declaration to this unbelieving audience is that God is real. The main purpose of his address was not to deal with human problems such as hunger, poverty, crime, etc. There are good reasons for making any of these subjects a starting point, or a way into the thinking of an audience. But hunger, poverty and crime are symptoms of a disease; it is the disease itself that must be attacked. This Areopagus sermon ought to reject the idea that the Christian message should just concentrate on social issues.

Paul does not begin with Bible verses, but with truths based on the Bible that the consciences of his hearers would understand. He does not argue the existence of God but boldly declares that God is real as something that human minds should agree with. There is a commendable 'the Bible says' attitude among evangelical people, meaning that the authority of the Bible is behind what we say to 'unchurched' people, and that we should quote verses to them because 'God must bless his word'. Commendable though this attitude is, it does not have the support of scripture itself! What we say must, of course, have biblical authority, but that authority depends on the content of the message being based on the Bible more than from quoting of exact Bible verses. Here, Paul appeals to the biblical testimony of conscience, confirmed by the evidence of the creation. Paul is not borrowing from Greek philosophy nor using his own instincts, his teaching is completely based on what the Old Testament says. He is using the Bible's argument – in passages like Psalm 19 – that God has already shown himself in nature. The God

Paul declared could not be thought up by the natural mind; he must make himself known by special revelation or he will not be known at all. The human mind is blinded (Romans 1:19-20), so Paul has the Bible's authority of special revelation for what he says, ***yet without mentioning any verses from the Bible.***

Again, Paul does not speak directly about the atonement for sin made by Jesus Christ through his death on the cross. In fact, this kind of preaching does not appear at all in the notes of the sermon we have in Acts 17. Some say that the redemptive work of Christ was probably included in the sermon, and left out when it was written down, but there is no basis for this. It seems better to ask ourselves if there are good reasons for the omission. Paul is in no hurry to introduce this aspect of the gospel. One New Testament commentator has said that there is no point in preaching that Jesus is Lord as if he was just another god to add to the many gods the Greeks already had. The significance of Jesus is that in him, the one true God is made known.

Paul emphasises that God is real – not Jesus, nor the Holy Spirit, but the oneness of God – as creator and sustainer of the world. There is little possibility of true worship until God is seen as creator and sustainer of all. There is little possibility of recognising God's claim on people until they acknowledge his sovereignty. There is no possibility of conviction of sin until men and women have been confronted by the God against whom they have sinned.

Paul's authority was from the Bible: "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*"

Great care is needed in the use of words. If, in our preaching, we use words that our audience understands with a *different meaning* from the one *we intend*, we are causing confusion. If we continue that way, regardless of the consequences, it will be like our audience is listening to three or four radio stations all at the same time! No, we must follow the apostle closely, we must be biblical.

The main purpose of Paul's address is to proclaim God but he does not assume that his hearers know who he is speaking about when he mentions God. The people around us also have no clear idea of who God is. When they hear the word 'God', many different ideas go through their minds. So, like Paul, we must define every term we use.

### **Chapter 12: The Main Point to Make**

When Paul comes to the central declaration (verses 24–26) there is no suggestion of having ideas in common or having a discussion. There is only one way of dealing with ignorance about God and that is by the declaration of revealed truth. This does not mean you shouldn't have a question and answer session, but it does mean not doing anything that might confuse or fail to make men face the true and living God.

Paul's whole address is based on the fact that God is a living person, and this happens both indirectly and directly.

He refers to God who made the world; who is Lord and who does not live in man-made shrines. He uses personal pronouns and speaks of God giving and determining. All these words describe God as a living person. Paul is contradicting the beliefs of both the Epicureans and the Stoics. The Stoics' idea of an impersonal universal reason behind everything would have been especially challenged. Paul was destroying their view of fate by his declaration of God as a living person.

Today's society also has many ideas about God that are impersonal and material. There are ideas that identify God with nature, spelling nature with a capital 'N', or others that equate God with fate or luck. To other people, God is simply a superstition or a psychological crutch for insecure people. For others, God is just like a very powerful computer. The importance of declaring the truth about God comes through at the end of the address. Unless it is rightly understood that God is a person to whom men and women must relate, the call to repentance will not be heard.

In verses 24 and 26, it is the turn of the Epicureans to be challenged: "*He made the world and everything in it. From one man he made every nation of men.*" No chance combination of atoms for Paul! In these two statements, Paul declares God to be the creator of everything. Nothing exists that was not made by God; God made the world; God made men. This went against the Epicurean philosophy that God is in some way part of nature. With

one clear statement Paul separates the creator from his creation, and places him above all and independent of all.

Modern people think God is something like fate, or the forces of nature, or evolution itself, but the Bible shows God to be sovereign over all things. This means that there is a rational explanation of everything and that the meaning of life can be discovered, and this also means that there are rules to be kept. The Maker has left instructions and it is possible for the Christian communicator to expose man's folly in not following them. In a world where rejection of authority is everywhere, we must declare the authority of God the creator.

However, Paul does not just declare God to be creator of the world. He insists also on God's creation of man (verse 26). He underlines the origin of the human race from one man, and clearly distinguishes man from the animals. At the creation, God did something new when he made man (Genesis 1:26). This can be used to address 21st century people. The theory of evolution obscures the unique relationship that human beings have with God. Christian communicators need to insist that whereas animals are not accountable to God for their actions, man *is* accountable. And, this is the fundamental difference from which men and women will use any way to escape, but they must not be allowed to do so!

The apostle adds that God *"gives all men life and breath and all things"* (verse 25). *"In him we live and move and*

*have our being"* (verse 28). In theological language, God is said to be both transcendent and immanent. He is not to be confined to *"temples built by hands"* (verse 24) but he is *"not far from each one of us"* (verse 27). Some say that verse 28 cannot be the words of Paul because it expresses the nearness of God rather than that God is above all things. But God is both among and above his creation. 21<sup>st</sup> century people also need to be confronted with the God who is above all things in sovereign authority and yet no one can run away from him (Psalm 139:7-12).

God did not make the world only to leave it to find its own way. Every new life comes from God; everything we need is constantly and continually supplied by him. The world depends on God every second of every minute of every day. Every breath we breathe is given by him (Daniel 5:23). The total effect of all this is to declare the majesty and sheer glory of God's power and wisdom and goodness. He does not depend on anyone. *"He is not to be served by human hands as if he needed anything"* (verse 25). Man-made religion always expects its followers to give things to the god or the gods. Even professing Christians think in terms of 'keeping the church going', or 'helping God to do his work'. We can give God nothing except what he has already given to us and now enables us to return to him.

God *"does not live in temples made with hands"* (verse 24). If we are to be true to Paul's example in our day, we must never give the impression that people have to 'go to church' to meet God, although we must not forget the

biblical principles of corporate worship, public ministry and church fellowship. So often, the impression we give is that of a kind of tribal god who can only be found in a small sect or is restricted to certain kinds of human experience. We have to declare the God who fills all things; who is in his entire world; who is in control of the world, and who has not given his sovereignty over the world to the devil. This is the God before whom people must bow in humility and submission. This is the God who inspires worship and praise and of whom we are not ashamed.

Both the Epicureans and the Stoics concluded in their philosophies that they must work out their own way of life. They did this in their different ways, but neither acknowledged any authority over their consciences. So Paul does not only declare God to be the maker of all things, he declares him to be the Lord (verse 24). This is a vital preparation for the call to repentance which follows. If God is just a creator, to disobey his instructions is merely to be a fool. But if God is both creator and the Lord who governs, then to disobey him is not merely to be a fool, but to be a condemned criminal. So there is a need to repent.

The gospel message begins, therefore, not with a call to reformation, but to repentance. The warning is not so much of self-ruin as of eternal judgement, and modern evangelism must take account of this. Our message is not mainly for failures, dropouts, the fearful, lonely or despairing - we do have a wonderful message for such

people. However, taking away people's guilt before a holy God is the most important problem that needs to be faced.

*“Often in current evangelism we present Jesus almost as a washing powder who washes whiter, or as a trip to end all trips. We isolate experience from truth. We leave a holy, creator God out of the picture. We must not do it or our shallow converts will keep their religious faith carefully insulated from their thinking about daily life.”* (Michael Green)

In verses 27-28 Paul is not teaching that if people seek God, or reach out for him, they will find him. For one thing, Paul taught that men and women were unable to find God by themselves. The answer to Job's question: *“Can we by searching find out God?”* (Job 11:7) is ‘No!’ However, Paul is saying that because God is accessible, it is, in fact, man's fault that he does not seek God. But Paul is not yet ready to show that God can only be found through Jesus Christ. His argument here is similar to that in Romans 10:5-8. We do not have to climb heights or descend the depths to meet God. We do not have to go anywhere because he is near. In this way Paul prepares his hearers not only for the call to repentance, but also for the announcement of justification by faith. This agrees with what Jesus said to the woman of Samaria (John 4:20-24): *“You will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.”*

Those worshippers of an unknown god had probably decided that they could not know God. In fact, they had to be told that God can be known.

### **Chapter 13: Keeping the Attention**

What can we do when we know that what we say does not agree with what our hearers believe? Do we carry on without trying to persuade our audience to continue to listen? If we do that, we are not following Paul and we are ignoring basic principles of communication. Paul knows the problem and keeps the attention of his audience by quoting from "*some of your own poets*" (verse 28) who said that, "*we are the offspring of God*". Paul accepts that statement. From it, he argues that God must therefore be a living person, as we are living persons. God is not an object made by man out of gold, silver or stone.

Paul used the words of an ungodly poet and agreed with them. This does not mean Paul treated the poetry as God's word, the Bible. Sometimes, non-Christian philosophers can express certain aspects of truth. Although they do not believe in God, creation still has some influence on their minds. These men do not have the full knowledge of God, but they can, at times have some understanding which, taken in isolation from the rest of their teaching, must be acknowledged as truth. For example, we will agree with the movement for women's liberation when it says that women are used as playthings and that shows such as 'Miss World' are like a cattle market. But we will reject many other things the movement supports. We would also

have to recognise as true some of the sentiments expressed by popular singers when they talk about the emptiness and deception of modern life, and expose its materialism and futility, but we would not say for one moment that 'pop' singers are therefore spiritually minded.

Evangelical Christians have traditionally rejected the idea of quoting from uninspired sources to illustrate something else. So either we must say to that, that Paul was wrong, or we must admit that this traditional evangelical view has been wrong. Surely it cannot be wrong to agree about good things with those to whom we speak? Paul was using a quotation that would have been familiar with the Athenian Stoics and Epicureans. He was not doing this for effect, or to shock, nor was he giving any kind of authority to the poet. Paul's only purpose was to keep his hearers attention.

In our communication with modern unbelievers, we must try to find points of contact in our personal witness, tracts, addresses or on radio or television. We will avoid the temptation to be popular, to show off knowledge, or to make funny remarks. Material which is not from the Bible should only be used to illustrate a point of contact. If we do this, we may probably quote from modern songs, newspaper reports, popular myths or perhaps well-known advertisements.

## Chapter 14: Develop the Theme over Time

Many writers on the subject of Paul's preaching say it is important to notice what he says in his letters, as this also gives us some idea of how he preached to unconverted people. For example, 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 shows clearly that Paul included the whole range of Christian truth in the very early stages of instruction to enquirers and converts. This is important, but it must not therefore be argued that Paul presented the 'whole gospel' at every contact. Here, the Areopagus sermon agrees with Matthew 7:6:

*“Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.”*

Paul is happy not to say now what will become clear at a later stage.

This contrasts with a modern fashion of demanding that the 'whole gospel' be preached all the time. It is felt that the gospel has not been preached unless the whole way of atonement has been made clear. What was the example of Jesus and his apostles? In his first approach, Jesus would just say: 'follow me' or 'come to me'. The apostles rarely concentrated on the atonement in their first declaration of the truth to each audience. We need to be very careful to think about what we mean by preaching the whole gospel, if we are to be faithful to the Bible. A complete

evangelistic ministry *must* expound the atoning work of Christ; but the first approach to unchurched people needs to begin much further back – with the reality of God and with the application of that reality to their consciences. To quote Dr. D.M.Lloyd-Jones on Isaiah 1, verses 1 – 18,

*“Some people say, ‘why don't you come to the gospel? Why don't you just offer Christ to the people? Why don't you just tell us what God has to give us in Christ?’”*

Again, my only answer is that I know full well that nobody will really listen to the gospel until they have seen their need of it. Why do so few of the people around us claim to be Christians? It is because they have never seen any need. Why do they not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? Their answer is, 'who is he? What has he got to give?' They are not interested - 'couldn't care less', they say. They regard the Christian faith as something played out, finished, totally irrelevant to life at the present time. So it is no use standing up and saying, 'come to Jesus'.

'Why shouldn't we come to Jesus?' they say, and it is our business to show them why.

It is sometimes argued that we may not have the whole of Paul's address included in Acts 17, and so we cannot be sure whether he spoke about the saving work of Christ or not. Paul may have broken off before he came to the end of what he wanted to say, and perhaps all we have are

notes of the address. Nevertheless, it is dangerous for us to try to guess what was left out without being sure of what was actually omitted. Furthermore, what we have in the Bible is what the Holy Spirit intended us to have. He intended us to observe Paul's approach in this kind of situation.

It is possible that one reason why the churches at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century generally fail to communicate to people who have no knowledge of the Bible is that we have ignored the guidance given to us in the Bible.

### **Chapter 15: Careful Application**

Paul now makes an application (verses 30–31). The application may not be quite what we would expect: just presenting facts without applying the implication of those facts to the conscience, is not supported by what Paul does in his address to the Areopagus.

Paul's application begins with a negative description of the condition of his audience. "*Such ignorance*" was a brave comment on the intellectual pride of the Stoics and Epicureans of Athens (1 Corinthians 1:20-21). What was this ignorance? It was ignorance of the true nature of God. The particular shrine in Athens to an unknown god was an attempt fill in the gaps in Athenian knowledge. "There may be a god we may not have discovered yet", they thought. This is a distorted view of deity. Their ignorance led many of them to make gods in their own image; led them into the shocking sins of misrepresenting God and of

worshipping objects made according to their own imagination. Paul does not praise the Athenians for being religious. He does not say, "at least you worship something", or "at least you are sincere". Paul's call is to repentance; "making a clean break with the past". The Athenians are on the wrong road and need to get on to the right one. Christ does not just add to other religions, he must reign alone.

It is sometimes thought that ignorance in some way relieves guilt. Since Paul continues with a call to repentance, that assumption must be wrong. Where there is no guilt, there is no need for repentance, only reformation. Sin blinds the minds of those who do not believe and all people are responsible to God for their sin. Ignorance of God, therefore, is not a neutral condition in which a decision can be made for or against the truth. Ignorance is spiritual darkness which can only be banished by the renewing power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul now seems to put his message and his hearers into the New Testament setting. "*In the past*" (verse 30) appears to refer to past ages and the words "*but now*" suggests that a new situation now exists. Verses 30 and 31 need to be taken as one complete statement, with the resurrection of Jesus Christ clearly seen as its turning point. A fundamental change took place in mankind's relationship to God when Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. We do not know exactly what that relationship was before the resurrection of Christ, but now the position is quite clear.

If in the light of creation men were “*without excuse*” (Romans 1:20) now, they are much more so because the fact of the resurrection of Christ can be known by all. The resurrection is the visible proof of the reality of God and of the day of judgement. The resurrection proves that there is life after death and makes clear that all people must one day stand before God their maker.

God’s overlooking of ignorance is not to be understood as tolerance. God is never complacent about idolatry. He is actively opposed to it (see Acts 14:16; Romans 3:25). His overlooking in the past resulted in unbelievers being “handed over to a reprobate mind” (Romans 1:28) until a way of salvation would be made known to them.

The New Testament setting has another importance. There is no excuse for ignorance. Christ has come. Men and women must be confronted with the fact of history, that Jesus Christ lived, died and rose again “*according to the scriptures*”. They must not be allowed to ignore the implications of this visible appearance of God in his world. Bible based evangelism is not asking people to believe in something that may or may not have happened. It is a call to face firm facts.

The call is to repentance. We deny the suggestion that Paul’s approach in this sermon has brought paganism and Christianity closer together. There would be no sense in a call to repentance if this had been the case. The mockery of the Athenians that follows also shows that they had not

understood Paul’s message that way. This is a most important thing for us to note with care today.

As we have seen, Paul laid the foundation on which the call to repentance is based, by exposing the guilt of his hearers before God. There is a valid gospel approach that is based on appealing to man’s needy state. Christ himself shouted: “*If any man is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.*” There is no doubt that Christ is the answer today to the needs of the sad and lonely, and of murderers, drunkards, drug addicts and those who are emotionally disturbed. But it is equally true that if we do not penetrate to the root cause of men and women’s need, we will reduce the gospel to psychological ideas or social welfare, which would leave our ‘converts’ in their sin to bear responsibility for their guilt on the last day.

Repentance is basically a change of mind, leading to a changed attitude and a changed way of life. There is such a thing as false repentance, something that looks like, but is not, repentance. So a change of mind, and indeed of speech, that does not result in a changed way of life is not a true response to the call to repentance. There can also even be a change of conduct that proves to be only temporary. The proof of true repentance is that the change is permanent.

Paul did not restrict the call of repentance with statements like “you can only repent if the Lord enables you”. This is true and there may be times when it is right to say so. But,

like the apostle, we should be free from self-imposed restrictions while not being theologically careless.

It may be argued that Paul announces that “*God commands all men everywhere to repent*” and that a command implies the ability of those commanded to obey. This is not so. The law of God was not given to prove that men were able to keep it, but the very opposite. The law of God shows man’s inability (Romans 7:9-11). Therefore any call to men and women to repent that suggests they have the ability to do so, or that applies pressure on their wills to repent on the assumption that they can do so if pressed hard enough, is not evangelism based on the Bible. Paul does no such thing. He announces God’s requirement clearly and without fear, having shown the reasons for it; the rest he leaves with the Spirit of God. If the Spirit reveals it to them, his hearers will discover that they are helpless sinners.

We should note that God’s judgement on sinners is not primarily based on their rejection of Christ. Millions have not heard the gospel. In many parts of the world there are thousands who have heard only a false or incomplete gospel and who, therefore, have not rejected the gospel. It is very dangerous to suggest that all such people are not under God’s judgement until they reject the true gospel. They *are* under God’s judgement even though they have not heard the gospel. The whole world is guilty before God, having rejected what conscience and creation say. (Romans 1:18-20; 2:12-16).

When Paul reached his application, he did not concentrate on the cross, but on the resurrection, as proof of the life after death, and therefore of judgement. Paul frequently uses the resurrection to summarize the saving work of Christ. Indeed, in Romans 8:34 he suggests that for those who are under attack from Satan, it is better to focus their faith on the resurrection of Christ. The Christian message is not just a system of ethics or a theory about life; it is centred on events that have happened – creation, incarnation, resurrection; what God has done, what God is doing and what God will yet do.

Further, the Christian message declares Jesus Christ first as Lord and then as Saviour. There is no justification for a message that puts Christ the Saviour before Christ the Lord. If we follow the New Testament we will only show salvation from sin to be the gift of the **Lord** Jesus Christ, who was crucified. The idea that men bow before Christ as Lord only after receiving salvation is not what the New Testament says and has disastrous consequences in people’s lives. Paul boldly states two facts on the assumption that there is evidence enough for them to be accepted without question: creation and Christ’s resurrection. We ought not, therefore, be ashamed of the evidence for each of these. The natural mind is blinded against accepting the evidence and its consequences; these two facts are nevertheless to be declared relying on the Holy Spirit to open the minds of people to receive them.

## Chapter 16: The Response Recorded

There were three types of responses to Paul's sermon to the Areopagus. Some Athenians mocked; some delayed; some believed (verses 32–34). Mockery arises for two reasons: one is the refusal of a materialistic mind to believe in anything miraculous; the other is that there is no adequate answer to the argument. We must be willing to be mocked for both these reasons. The current evolutionary climate will ensure disbelief in the miraculous element of the Christian faith until the Holy Spirit gives understanding. The idea that the miraculous elements must be removed from the gospel to make things easier for the modern mind has to be rejected. Paul knew this part of his message would be laughed at, but this did not cause him to leave it out. To remove the supernatural element is not just a denial of the gospel, but in the end leaves nothing of value in the gospel.

The delay of the Athenians may have been a way of rejecting the message, or perhaps they were wanting to explore this new idea (verse 21). It may have been both an unwillingness to respond and yet an unwillingness to ignore it altogether. It may simply have been a polite way of saying they wanted to discuss this again some time, sooner or later. It is difficult to decide which of these is true and, fortunately, it is not necessary for us to do so.

In our case, we must be careful how we handle such a response. We have to obey the Lord's warning not to "throw your pearls to pigs" (Matthew 7:6); that is, not to

persist in exposing the gospel to unnecessary ridicule. But it is vital that we make ourselves available for further witness to the truth if people have a genuine desire to come back for more.

Happily, some Athenians "*became followers of Paul and believed*" (verse 34). The order of words here may not be significant, but it is interesting that Luke notes that these people identified themselves first with Paul, and then, that they believed. Sometimes we may not welcome enquirers because of a desire to see converts relying not on us, but on the Lord. However, it is often through personal loyalty that spiritual progress is made. Further instruction that leads to faith in Christ is only possible if there is, in the first place, a genuine person-to-person commitment.

Some people have compared the response of the Athenians with the response to the Christian message in the earlier chapters of Acts. They argue that Paul's approach to the Areopagus is shown to be wrong by the poor response in comparison with other places. It would be difficult to prove that the response to Paul at Athens was substantially different from any other place, and it is interesting that, historically, the church in Athens lasted for a very long time. F.W.Farrar in "The life and work of St. Paul" wrote:

*"He left Athens as he had lived in it, a despised and lonely man. And yet, ... his visit was not in vain ... Of all who visit Athens, myriads connect it with the name of Paul who never so much as remember that,*

*since the epoch of its glory, it has been trodden by the feet of poets and conquerors and kings. They think not of Cicero, or Virgil, of Germanicus, but of the wandering tent maker. In all his seeming defeats lay the hidden germ of certain victory. He founded no church at Athens, but there – it may be under the fostering charge of the converted Areopagite – a church grew up. In the next century it furnished to the cause of Christianity its martyr bishops and its eloquent apologists. In the third century it flourished in peace and purity. In the fourth century it was represented at Nicaea ...”*

### **Conclusion**

The Areopagus address is full of theology for our instruction. It is fascinating in its unusual approach. But it is also given to us by the Holy Spirit as a pattern essential for us to follow. It is a directive for situations similar to those of our own times. Are we not guilty if we fail to follow its principles?

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