

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

Preaching To Pagans
September 10th, 2023
Acts 17:16-34
Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 17:16; that’s on page 926 in your pew Bibles. We’re carrying on with the account of Paul’s second missionary journey and we are looking today at the story of Paul’s preaching on Mars Hill – that’s what the word “Areopagus” means. In the same way that Luke records a representative sample of Paul’s preaching to Jewish synagogue attenders in Acts 13, so here now he preserves an example of how the Apostle spoke when addressing biblically illiterate pagans. I’m using that term in the technical sense - these people were actual pagans. Paul is interacting here with two philosophical schools within the wider movement; he is talking to Epicureans and Stoics, Luke tells us that in verse 18. The Epicureans believed that the gods were extremely distant from us as human beings. They weren’t personally interested in us and they weren’t personally ACCESSIBLE TO US and therefore to pray and to worship was a waste of time; the key was to figure out how to be happy and to enjoy life. The Stoics were pantheistic in their mindset; they thought of God as a sort of “world soul”. They believed that the universe operated according to the principle of REASON. They thought there was a sort of underlying spiritual PHYSICS to the world which they referred to as “the logos”. The logos was opposed by our inner passions and desires, so the Stoics were always talking about how to live ABOVE such things. They also believed that the universes was always moving in CYCLES – and observing these cycles and watching how things played out could help you live more peacefully and prosperously in the here and now.

Ok – that’s who Paul was speaking to in this story, and that’s why his sermon here sounds so different than the sermon he preached to Bible reading, synagogue attending Jews back in Acts 13. In that sermon Paul was talking about how Jesus is the Messiah we’ve all been waiting for!! He is the Son of David and the Suffering Servant all rolled into one! He is everything anticipated in the Old Testament – thanks be to God! But of course, that sermon wouldn’t make any sense to the people in Athens. They didn’t have a category for “Messiah” or “Suffering Servant”. They didn’t believe in a relational God who was trying to reconcile creation to himself – and so Paul here has to start WAY FURTHER BACK in the process. He has to construct a FRAMEWORK into which the coming of Jesus Christ makes sense – and that’s why this sermon has been preserved, because it shows us an inspired example of how to do that. And of course, we’re very interested in that process nowadays, because once again, we find ourselves preaching to biblically illiterate people who have absolutely no framework through which to receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

That’s a significant change, isn’t it?

When I was a kid all the atheists I knew were CHRISTIAN ATHEISTS – meaning, the God they DIDN’T BELIEVE IN was the God of the Bible. And so all of the categories for our discussions were essentially Christian categories.

But that’s not the case anymore.

The people we’re talking to out there now are all over the map: Some of them believe in reincarnation. Some of them believe that the universe is a computer simulation. Some of them believe that there are an infinite number of universes and that the world is a quantum accident and that life therefore has absolutely no moral or spiritual meaning at all.

Ok – so how do you share the Gospel with people like that?

Well, you have to do exactly what Paul does here. You have to begin by building a framework. So let’s take a look and see how he does it. Hopefully you have your Bibles open by now to Acts 17. I’ll begin reading at verse 16. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. 18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbling wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. 19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,

28 for “‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “‘For we are indeed his offspring.’

29 Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. 30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” 33 So Paul went out from their midst. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them. (Acts 17:16-34 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

In this story we see the Apostle Paul addressing the intellectual and cultural elite of his day. This is the modern day equivalent of being invited to give an address at Oxford or Harvard. Paul is speaking to highly educated but biblically illiterate pagan people and he preaches a sermon that has basically 4 POINTS or sub-sections. Now, biblical scholars will point out here that an address like this would typically have been given over the course of 3-4 hours, so what we have here in Acts is obviously a summary. D.A. Carson actually suggests that what Luke has probably done in this passage is just mash together all of Paul's main section headings¹ – so this is LESS 'transcript' and more 'OUTLINE', but it is still very helpful for us to see the sorts of topics that Paul covers.

Paul's Sermon On Mars Hill:

He begins with:

1. The doctrine of creation

In verses 22-23 we have his basic introduction: "I see you are very religious. Good. I see you even have an altar to the unknown god – good. What you worship as unknown, I now declare to you." And then look at where he begins; he begins in verse 24 with:

"The God who made the world and everything in it" (Acts 17:24 ESV)

He begins with the doctrine of creation. The Greeks believed that the universe was eternal – and as I mentioned, the Stoics believed that the universe was CYCLICAL – what comes around goes around. There is no purpose, no end point, just existence. PATTERNED, LOGICAL existence – that's what they believed, but Paul says: "No. The universe had a beginning. The universe has a CREATOR."

And that changes everything, doesn't it?

¹ See here: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/sermon/the-gospel-and-postmodern-minds-how-do-we-reach-out-to-a-changing-culture-without-selling-out/>

If the universe doesn't have a creator then WE are the highest point of reference in existence. We are gods – deciding right and wrong for ourselves. We are the masters of our own destinies. We can use our words to SHAPE REALITY, as opposed to using our words to REFLECT reality.

It really does all begin here. This is how we got paganism in the first place. Paul says in Roman 1:

“For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.” (Romans 1:21 ESV)

Paganism BEGINS as soon as people deny the reality of their creator. Paganism is, in essence the de-Godding of God. We make him more like us and we make us more like him – we meet in the middle and we negotiate reality.

But that's not how the universe is, Paul says and the Gospel isn't going to make sense to anyone who fails to understand that. If you think the universe is an accident and there is no creator and no purpose and no law then how in the world are you going to even begin to make sense of Christ on the cross?

You're not going to be able to do it – and so Paul begins here, with the doctrine of creation, and more often than not, we'll need to do the same again in our day.

The second thing we see Paul talking about here is:

2. The doctrine of aseity

That's an old word that we don't use much anymore, but we probably need to bring it back. The doctrine of aseity refers to the fact that God doesn't need us, we need him, so Paul says in verses 24-25 that the God who is Creator, the God who made all things:

“does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.” (Acts 17:24-25 ESV)

Here Paul is striking at the HEART of pagan religion. When the Greeks and Romans interacted with the gods they did so in order to GET SOMETHING FROM THEM. They didn't believe that the gods LOVED THEM – remember they didn't believe that the gods were ABOVE the universe, they believed that the gods were with them IN the universe. The gods were superior beings who could be bargained with and even manipulated. “We'll give you a few virgin priestesses that we steal from the people we conquer and we'll sacrifice a few bulls and goats, and in return we would like you to take an interest in our military campaigns and our harvest cycle.”

And Paul strikes directly at the heart of that. He says that the God who is there is neither hungry, nor lonely. He is not cold. He is not warm. He has no body. He needs NO THING.

The God who is there is THE GIVER. He LOVES – therefore he creates. He is GOOD – therefore he gives. When we worship him we RECEIVE and RESPOND. Religion therefore is about gratitude, imitation, appreciation and response. We RECEIVE from GOD and we GIVE to others, that is the rhythm of all true and pleasing religion.

Now, not only would that be news to pagans in Paul's day and age, it would also be news to many Christians sitting in our churches today. We often THINK in our inner monologues, more or less like pagans. We think that if we read our Bibles more or give more or sing more then perhaps we won't get cancer. Perhaps our children will all follow Jesus. In essence we think that if we GIVE GOD what HE wants then he will give us what WE WANT².

But that's not how real religion works.

REAL religion is from start to finish a matter of GRACE – and we need to be clear on that before we begin to engage with the neighbours. God didn't send Jesus to earth because he was lonely up in heaven. God is Trinity. He exists in perpetual relationship. He does not NEED US to feel complete. Creation, in the Bible is the overflow of God's love and joy and human beings are the crowning expression of that.

² <https://www.samstorms.org/enjoying-god-blog/post/is-the-song--what-a-beautiful-name-it-is--heretical>

So the God who exists, the God who creates is also the God who GIVES. If you don't understand that, you are going to have a hard time with the GRACE of the Gospel.

The third thing Paul speaks about here in this address is:

3. The doctrine of anthropology

Or the doctrine of man, however you want to think about that. He is speaking about that in verses 26-29. The Greeks did not believe in the unity of the races – in fact, they believed themselves to be superior to everyone else. They referred to non-Greeks as “barbarians” – and this has been the perspective of MOST ethnic groups throughout history. As any student of history will tell you, RACISM is NORMAL for human beings, not exceptional. Now hear me carefully: I am not saying that racism is GOOD, I am saying it is COMMON. Historically speaking, it is PAR FOR THE COURSE. Most human beings throughout history have believed in the superiority of their group and most human beings have been suspicious and even contemptuous toward other groups.

The Chinese believe themselves superior to non-Chinese and have been generally hostile toward outsiders. The same can be said of the Japanese. The same can be said of most ethnic groups.

It isn't white people who invented racism.

Racism is as old as Genesis 3.

And the truth is that it was the Christian worldview that slowly but surely undermined the racism and xenophobia of fallen human beings. Christianity was the first major movement in human history to say things like:

Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. (Colossians 3:11 ESV)

The Christians said: We can be all one big happy family again through the person and work of Christ!! They believed that because of Genesis 1 and 2. They believed, as Paul says here, that God:

“made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth”
(Acts 17:26 ESV)

Christianity teaches that all human beings have a common ancestor. We believe therefore that all human beings are equal in dignity and worth. We are all one SPECIES. We are all, in a common sense, the sons and daughters of God, and whenever, and wherever human beings don't believe that you get war, genocide and holocaust.

Do you know what the original full-length title was for Darwin's Origin Of Species? It was:

(show as slide)

On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life

Favoured Races – did you catch that? Darwin was writing to explain why some people were winners and some people were losers. It is not a huge leap from Darwin to Nietzsche to Hitler to the Holocaust. That's what happens when you believe that some people are better and purer and more favoured than others.

Anthropology matters – and so Paul includes that in his presentation to the pagans on Mars Hill. He concludes his speech to them by addressing:

4. The doctrine of eschatology

Eschatology has to do with the END toward which all history is moving. Remember, the Greeks didn't believe that history was moving toward anything. They believed that the universe was eternal. It had always existed. It would always exist. History was a series of interconnected, never ending circles.

Not so, Paul says.

Look at verse 30:

“The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:30-31 ESV)

According to the Bible, history has seasons or stages and is moving toward an ultimate END.

“We’ve just come through something called the times of ignorance”, Paul says, “and things are ramping up now toward a time of Final Judgment. The Final Judgment is not the absolute END of the human story, there is something beyond that; we know that because of the fact that Jesus rose from the dead.”

So we have ORDER, PROGRESS and PURPOSE in human history – all of which would have been completely foreign to a first century pagan thinker but all of which is clearly taught in the Bible. Paul says that God organized people into nations and he put them in particular places, all toward the END that:

“they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.” (Acts 17:27 ESV)

Now, as Bible readers we know that this may have been the plan but it never really happened because of the failure of the people of Israel. They were supposed to be a light to the nations. They were supposed to know God and tell others about God – but they didn’t do that. In fact, instead of leading the nations into the worship of God, they were led by the nations into the worship of idols – and so that’s why the middle stage here seemed to have gone on interminably – because there wasn’t a lot of light coming out of Israel to GUIDE THE NATIONS IN THEIR GROUPEING.

But, that stage is over. A brighter light has come into the world and so we are on a steep ramp now toward the Final Judgment. God has appointed a DAY:

“on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:31 ESV)

All of human history is hurtling toward a funnel – a very narrow passageway that leads TO and THROUGH the Final Judgment. Everyone will stand before God and here either: “well done thou good and faithful servant” or “I never knew you. Depart from you workers of lawlessness.”

And after that, an entirely new beginning.

That’s where the Apostle Paul ends his speech. This is clearly PRE-EVANGELISM. In fact it is amazing to think about what he doesn’t feel the need to cover. He doesn’t say anything about the Virgin Birth. He doesn’t refer to Christ’s sinless life. He doesn’t even mention his substitutionary death on the cross.

This is PRE-EVANGELISM!

This is the framework people need to have in order to hear and respond to the Gospel.

Alright, we’re almost out of time, but I want to zoom out for just a moment and highlight a few methodological takeaways. We’ve been focusing on the “WHAT” of Paul’s presentation, but let’s also notice a few of the “HOWs”.

Very quickly then, when preaching to modern day pagans, and when trying to help them construct a framework into which the coming of Christ makes sense, it will be helpful to:

When Preaching To Modern Day Pagans:

1. Avoid doctrinal obscurities

Notice that Paul stuck to the BIG ROCKS and the MAIN ROADS of Christian theology. He talked about who God is and who we are and where history is going – he didn’t deal in

theological speculation or tribal distinctives – and neither should we. When you are talking to an unsaved, biblically illiterate pagan person that is not the time to deal in your niche views on baptism or the rapture or women’s head coverings – those are all legitimate topics, but those are intramural topics. Paul stuck to the main roads when he was dealing with pagan outsiders and so should we. We’re constructing a FRAME, not filling in all the blanks.

The second takeaway I think we can find here is the need to:

2. Address points of interest and intersection

Paul wasn’t dealing in the abstract – he was careful to give his presentation in a way that made CONTACT with areas of commonality and contrast. So for example he takes as his starting place this altar that he saw to an unknown god. “Ok”, he says, “so you admit that there is probably more going on in the Divine Realm than you have access to. Well, let me tell you about that.”

Paul is aware of the questions these people are asking – and he tailors his presentation to address those questions. R.C. Sproul says helpfully here:

“His speech answered the three biggest questions they struggled with – life, motion and being.”³

Where did we come from? Where are we going? Who are we?

All the Greek philosophical schools were organized around answering those questions – and so of course, Paul structured his address with an eye to answering those questions as well; that’s good pre-evangelism. We’ve got to know what the questions are in our culture so that our framing can be constructed in a way that addresses those gaps and concerns.

Then thirdly, as we see Paul doing here, we also need to:

3. Acknowledge common grace

³ R.C. Sproul, *Acts: An Expository Commentary* (Sanford: Ligonier Ministries, 2019), 281.

We have to be careful not to begin on a hostile footing. So much of apologetics today seems to begin with the idea that we have to tear people down, we have to show why everything they believe is evil or stupid – and only then once we’ve beaten them down to the ground can we lift them up with the Good News of the Gospel – but that’s not what Paul does. He commends them – “I see you are very religious. Good for you. You want to know things. You want to connect with God – good.” And he even quotes some of their literature and philosophy back to them. He does that in verse 28. I. Howard Marshall says here:

“Paul was prepared to take over the glimmerings of truth in pagan philosophy about the nature of God.”⁴

That’s what it means to acknowledge common grace – it means to believe that there is such a thing as a “glimmering of truth” in pagan philosophy. There is not enough truth to what our friends and neighbours believe – but there is some truth, and you can build a bridge and soften a heart by acknowledging those things.

And then finally, when we find ourselves engaging with people who have no real framework for receiving the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we need to:

4. Allow for time to process

Look at how this story ends; verses 32-33 say:

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” 33 So Paul went out from their midst. (Acts 17:32-33 ESV)

So Paul gave his presentation, some mocked, others seemed curious – and Paul went home.

He didn’t press for a decision. He didn’t make an alter call and play 16 verses of Just As I Am – he understood that there was a fair bit of work to do here and these folks were going to need some time to process.

⁴I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 306.

Listen – I am not saying that we shouldn't call for people to make a decision – I am saying sometimes, when dealing with people who have no conceptual framework with which to receive the Gospel, you may have to adopt a more patient and plodding approach. Calling for immediate decision in such a circumstance might actually result in superficial and perfunctory faith.

Paul was willing to settle for the first down here, and I think there is wisdom in that. He was willing to leave Athens understanding that he hadn't told them everything they would need to know in order to be converted – but he had moved the ball. He had laid the groundwork that would position them to hear and respond to the Gospel in the future.

Sometimes that's the mission. Sometimes the mission is to establish a framework, create connections, point out contrasts and call for prayerful and humble consideration – and of course, to do all of that with gentleness and respect.

O God help!

Let me pray for us.