

- i. Paul introduced his discourse by taking note of the Athenians' acknowledgement of an unknown god – a deity of whom they were admittedly ignorant. From that launching point he went on to describe the Living God and in that way affirmed the truth of what the altar inscription conveyed: The people of Athens – even the most enlightened among them – were indeed ignorant of this God. If they didn't realize that before, they certainly did now.

Before that day these philosophers would have admitted their ignorance in the sense that they – as their fellow Greeks – had no conscious knowledge of the God Paul was describing to them. But his description compelled their admission all the more because they now realized that He is radically different from any deity they'd ever conceived or imagined. The Creator-God Paul was proclaiming transcends His creatures and cannot be defined by creaturely categories – even by man himself, though man bears God's image and likeness. The divine image makes human beings innately aware of such a God, but it doesn't enable them to fully comprehend Him or know Him as He is.

This incapacity is bound up in the Creator-creature distinction, but it's been exacerbated by the fall and the resultant estrangement. Alienated from God, men can only seek to understand and relate to Him through the resource of their own fractured minds. Even the truth provided by general revelation is twisted by corrupt human perception, so that men end up worshipping the natural order that bears witness to God rather than God Himself (Romans 1:18-23).

Short of divine intervention, men are consigned to remain ignorant of the true God, even if He is presented and explained to them. So it was that Paul's gospel was met with confusion, incredulity and scoffing by men who were skilled sophisticates in metaphysical matters. For all their acumen and powers of reason, left to themselves they were powerless against their own ignorance.

- 1) The ignorance of the Athenian elite was their own, but it was also expressive of a salvation-historical reality – what Paul referred to as “*the times of ignorance*.” He wasn't speaking about his hearers' personal lives in ignorance, but was drawing upon his overall two-age conception of salvation history. “Times of ignorance” refers to the first of those ages, namely the time preceding Christ's coming. It was the age of the First Adam: the era of Creator-creature estrangement – the age of man in exile from God. The second age was inaugurated by the Christ event and is everlasting and marked by fulfillment; it is the age of the Last Adam.

- Paul recognized the former Adamic age as preparing for Christ's coming. It laid the groundwork for His fulfillment of the divine promise of creational renewal and restoration first revealed in the protoevangelium in Eden (Genesis 3:15). The first age illumined and heralded the age that was to come, but it didn't realize it; it was the age of promise, not fulfillment.

- And being promissory and preparatory, it fulfilled its ordained ministration in the context of continuing alienation and spiritual darkness. It spoke of and longed for the day when the curse would be vanquished, the eyes of the blind opened and the prisoners liberated from the dungeon of their self-enslavement, but until then the estrangement of Adam's race and its resultant ignorance of God would remain intact. Men were consigned to "*grope along the wall like blind men, like those who have no eyes*" (Isaiah 59:1-11).

And so, while the "times of ignorance" didn't leave men guiltless in their unbelief, they also reflected the purpose and timing of the Sovereign who "works all things according to the counsel of His will." God *overlooked* those times, not in the sense that He took no notice of human rebellion and unbelief, "winked" at it (KJV) or excused it, but in the sense that the appointed day hadn't yet arrived in which He would fulfill His promise and restore all things to Himself (Romans 3:21-26; Galatians 3:15-4:5).

- 2) But now that day had come and the new age of renewal and reconciliation has dawned. According to God's precise, predetermined scheme, the former age has "served its purpose in its generation" and reached its terminus in Christ. It has passed away, not by abrogation or replacement, but by fulfillment, yielding itself to its everlasting successor: the new age of the *eschaton* – the age of the Spirit and His new creation.
- 3) The arrival of the *eschaton* has brought with it the promised globalizing of the people of God. Even as Christ's work of creational renewal and restoration has cosmic implications, so it has *universal* ones. Previously the world of men had carried out their lives in the context of the "times of ignorance" – partly because of their own darkened minds, but also because God had left them to themselves (ref. Acts 14:16; cf. Ephesians 2:11ff).
  - As part of His work of preparation, God had chosen to reveal Himself to a single covenant nation descended from the man Abraham and the handful of Gentiles who were engrafted into that nation. The rest of the world He left to itself, providing only the witness of His general providential provision and beneficence.
  - But God had also revealed through His Jewish prophets that the coming age would see Him shining His illumining light on all of Adam's race and gathering to Himself a multitude of covenant sons drawn from every tribe, tongue, nation and people. When the Servant had completed His redemptive and restorative work, Yahweh's covenant matriarch *Zion* would have to enlarge her habitation in order to accommodate all the children she would bear for Him (Isaiah 53-55).

Now the Servant had come and fulfilled His task and the divine design of global ingathering was underway. God was taking to Himself a people from every tribe and nation, but by joining them to His Messiah-Son (ref. Isaiah 11:1-12, 49:1-13). Through the proclamation of the gospel the light is now dawning upon the nations, and all are obligated to take note of the light and enter into it. The times of ignorance have passed and so has human excuse; God is now “*commanding all men everywhere to repent.*”

And so Paul’s exhortation to the Athenians was grounded in salvation-historical considerations rather than personal ones. That is, he was calling them to repentance, not on the basis of their personal sinfulness, but the fact that God had accomplished His eternal purpose for His creation. He wasn’t exhorting them to alter their behavior, but to recognize what the Living God has done and enter into it in faith. Paul wasn’t interested in passing along some facts about God; he wanted the Athenians to understand what He has done in His Son and what it means for them to be living in the time of fulfillment – the “ends of the ages.”

God isn’t a tribal deity committed to a particular nation or people; He is the God of all creation, and His loving design for it (not just the human race) lies behind Christ’s coming and self-sacrifice (John 3:16). The Christ event had its goal in creational reconciliation and the establishment of everlasting *shalom*; that truth established the responsibility of Paul’s hearers. And so, while men have always had the same fundamental need and obligation to turn to God in faith, Christ’s coming has introduced new dynamics to it.

- First of all, the cross powerfully attested the human condition and predicament and presented God’s solution for it. In light of Calvary, no person can claim ignorance of his own sinfulness and the holy and just God who sits in judgment of him. Calvary dashed to the ground the human delusion of personal goodness and merit.
- Furthermore, the very nature of God’s remedy – His singular Son’s substitutionary self-offering – affirms the principle of universality on three fronts: the universal *extent* of the human predicament, the universal *incapacity* of human beings to rectify it, and therefore the universal *relevance* of Christ’s atoning work (cf. John 4:1-42 with 1 John 4:14; also 1 Timothy 2:1-6, 4:10; 1 John 2:1-2).
- The Christ event has universal implications (as the prophets themselves had declared), and this is the reason for the gospel’s universal witness and demand. Jesus’ cross testified that the universal human plight has one remedy, and His resurrection affirmed that God has brought that remedy. It is precisely because the problem is universal and the solution is singular that Jesus’ final directive to His disciples was to take the message of His remediation to the whole world and call all men everywhere to lay hold of it (Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 24:44ff; Acts 1:8ff).

- Finally, the resurrection itself adds a crucial component to human understanding and obligation. It affirmed that God has accomplished His purpose in sending His Son – a purpose that importantly transcends mere atonement for sin. The resurrection does indeed testify to Christ’s satisfaction, but atonement has a larger goal than satisfying divine justice and appeasing divine wrath. *Christ’s resurrection was the first-fruits of the new creation; it testifies to the world of men that the old order has passed away and the promised eschaton has come.*

The goal of Calvary was that the whole of the creation should be liberated from the estrangement of the curse, reconciled to its Creator and brought into the shalomic communion for which it was created. God has accomplished that goal (Colossians 1:19-20; cf. Ephesians 1:9-10), and now integrity and conformity to the truth necessitate that every human being personally enter into that reconciliation and the new creation in Christ. This is the message of the gospel (2 Corinthians 5:14-21); this was Paul’s exhortation to repentance at Athens.

- 4) The dark night of alienation and ignorance has passed; the day has dawned and God is no longer leaving the nations to themselves. Even as He has sent His gospel into all the world, so every human being is obligated to repentance and faith and each will give an account for his response: God has “*fixed a day in which He will judge the world.*” The One who appointed the “times of ignorance” and the day of their passing (ref. again Galatians 3:15-4:5) has also ordained a day of final reckoning (17:31a).

Paul added that God will execute His judgment “*in righteousness.*” His point wasn’t that God is a righteous judge and therefore His verdict and sentence will be fair and just (though this is certainly true). Rather, Paul was saying that righteousness will be the criterion applied in the judgment. Righteousness refers to a thing’s *rightness* – to its conformity to its true nature and function. In light of the Christ event, righteousness for human beings means their repentance and reconciliation to God in Christ; it means their discerning the fact and meaning of the “ends of the ages” and entering into the sonship for which they were created.

So also Paul noted that this righteous judgment will be “*through a Man whom God has appointed.*” The obvious sense of this is that Jesus Himself will be the Judge on that day, but Paul meant more than this: The coming judgment will be *in relation* to Jesus, not simply at His hand; He is the basis of judgment as well as the Judge Himself. That is, men will be judged on the basis of what they’ve done with Him – how they’ve responded to the renewal and reconciliation He has brought about.

- Have they scoffed at the truth of the new creation and the consummation to come, insisting that “all things continue as they have from the beginning” (2 Peter 3:1ff)?

- Have they clung to their idolatry, ignoring the testimony of the cross and holding to their blind confidence that their goodness and works will carry them through whatever judgment awaits them?
- Have they tried to sew a new patch on an old garment, attempting to embrace a Savior who preserves the old order of things and allows them to continue in it (Luke 5:27-39)?

In that day the Judge will pose the question, “*Who do you say that I am?*” and the answer men provide will be fully sufficient to vindicate or condemn them (Matthew 25:31-46; cf. Matthew 7:21-23). The Christ-centeredness of the final judgment helps to explain why Paul chose to refer to Jesus with the descriptor *man* (17:31b).

Jesus will judge the world as Man (i.e., the “Son of Man” – John 5:25-29), not in denial or disregard of His deity, but for three important reasons related to the Incarnation and the divine purpose in it:

*First*, it was as a man that He accomplished His Father’s work. Death and the curse had come through human disobedience; so a human “seed of the woman” – a second Adam – would vanquish the curse and restore life to God’s creation (Romans 5:12-21). This was according to *propriety* and not simply promise (indeed, the promise of the protoevangelium presupposed this propriety), for only a man could give himself as a suitable substitute for men. God cannot fulfill man’s responsibility of integrity and fidelity in his relationship with his Creator-Father any more than a man can fulfill God’s; if someone is to stand in the stead of a human being, it must be another human; it must be a “son of man.”

*Secondly*, Jesus’ substitutionary self-sacrifice as a man testifies to men that He was addressing a *human* problem in relation to God. And the fact that He did so as a sinless man emphasizes that no other person could do what He did; He acted as the sole righteous member of Adam’s race. These things leave a thinking person no choice but to conclude that what Jesus did pertains to every single human being, whoever he might be and whatever the particulars of his individual life.

*Finally*, and by implication, Jesus’ life and work as a “son of man” establish and illumine the obligation of all men: By coming into the world as a man Jesus made His Father’s revelation of Himself and His purpose fully comprehensible to human beings. In that way He has stripped men of the excuse of ignorance of the divine nature, purpose and will. So it is with His self-offering: His *substitutionary death* as a man certifies the plight of all men; on the other hand, His *resurrection* as glorified man testifies to them of their obligation to enter into Him as the Last Adam and so attain to their created destiny as members of God’s true humanity.

- 5) As no one can claim exemption from Christ's judgment, so no one can claim ignorance of his obligation to Him. God has openly testified to what He has done and the implications for men by *raising Jesus from the dead* (17:31c). Paul declared to the Athenians that Jesus' resurrection provides sure testimony concerning Him – evidence set before all men and to which they are accountable. Specifically, the resurrection furnishes proof that Jesus is *uniquely appointed* by the God Paul has been proclaiming.

Paul's statement seems to most closely associate Jesus' appointment by God with His role as the world's Judge, and this is certainly consistent with the Lord's own words (ref. again John 5:25-29). But the context – and Paul's overall theology – supports a broader, more encompassing understanding: *Jesus' appointment by His Father encompasses every aspect of His work in relation to the created order*. He was appointed as the One in whom every created thing is to find its true meaning and purpose (Ephesians 1:9-10), and that "summing up" in Him is grounded in His taking to Himself (and therefore to the Godhead) the nature of man.

- Jesus was appointed to be the singular God-Man: the ontological, everlasting conjunction of deity and humanity. In Himself, then, Jesus is the point of connection and communion between God and men, and therefore also between God and the rest of the creation.
- By implication, Jesus' appointment also includes His role as the Last Adam, the Seed of Eve and Abraham, the True Israel, True David and Melchizedekian King-Priest.
- All of those roles, in turn, presuppose and find their realization in connection with His work as the Isaianic *Servant of Yahweh* – the One appointed to banish the curse and purify, renew and restore the vandalized creation and usher it into the everlasting shalom to which it was appointed (ref. Isaiah 42-55; cf. Colossians 1:15-20).

Christ's resurrection certified that He fulfilled His appointment as Yahweh's Servant. Therefore, it testifies that He is the Last Adam and first-fruits of the new creation as well as the King of Kings and Great High Priest. In this way Jesus' resurrection "proves" the righteous obligation of the human race to enter into the truth as it is in Him (Ephesians 4:20-24), and He will judge every man accordingly (John 3:16-21).

At bottom, for men to refuse to come to Christ in faith is for them to insist upon living according to a false reality. Whether by continuing to put old wine into their old wineskins or attempting to fill them with new wine, they are refusing to acknowledge the Christ of the true gospel; they are showing their contentment with the former "times of ignorance."

- 6) So it was that many listening to Paul's words were more captivated by the *idea* of resurrection than by the significance of Jesus' resurrection and its implications for them (17:32).
- Whether or not it was conscious or intentional, focusing on the idea of resurrection as a metaphysical and philosophical concept allowed these philosophers to skirt the uncomfortable demands that Christ's resurrection imposed upon them.
  - Some evaded those demands by scoffing and sneering (cf. again 17:18); others did so by deferring their judgment and response to a future day – "*We shall hear you again concerning this.*"
- 7) The gospel invariably encounters unbelief and rejection, but, by God's mercy, it also bears the fruit of faith and new life – once again among women as well as men. The gospel, the life it proclaims and holds out and the fruit it bears are no respecters of persons. The new creation doesn't draw the distinctions of gender, status, class, etc. that marked the old order; all who are joined to Christ by faith are equal partakers in it (ref. 2 Corinthians 5:14-17; cf. Galatians 3:28, 6:12-16 and 1 Peter 3:7).

Thus the new creation produces a radically new paradigm of human community. *It is of an entirely different order of things in that its members have no necessary natural or earthly connection or basis of association.*

In this world, every form and expression of human community is defined and bound together by natural features and considerations, whether blood, ethnicity, culture, class, socio-economic status, religious doctrine and practice, or even common interest or need. There is no human community in this world that isn't formed around one or more natural considerations.

But there is only one all-encompassing community in the new creation, and that community is formed and defined by one all-encompassing spiritual consideration: *union with Christ by His Spirit* (Romans 8:9-10).

- This community does share common lineage and ethnicity, but of a spiritual sort: Its members are born of the Spirit and offspring of the Last Adam (1 Corinthians 15:1-49; cf. Romans 5:12-21).
- They also share the same royal and priestly class and distinction, but as kings and priests in Christ (Revelation 5:1-10; cf. 2 Timothy 2:11-12; 1 Peter 2:1-5).
- They further share a common religious doctrine and practice, but as those who have been *Christified*: Their lives are hidden with Christ in God and they possess His mind by His indwelling Spirit.