

THE GOSPEL FROM ATHENS: PAUL'S SPEECH BEFORE THE AREOPAGUS AND THE EVANGEL FOR TODAY

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This article illustrates the way the apostles contextualised their messages.

Paul's address to the Areopagus court in Athens (Acts 17:22–34) represents a carefully targeted and thoughtful presentation of the Christian message to a particular audience in a unique setting. In a centre outstanding for the visible expression—in art and architecture—of Greek religion, Paul engages with the folk-belief, the popular religious perceptions, of the day and the place. Among an audience versed in philosophical thought and learning, he interacts with their intellectual perspectives and their outlook on the ultimate issues of life. He takes on their worldview, and meets it with the Christian proclamation—or, more particularly, with selected elements of the Christian message, chosen because they address the need of the situation. He speaks in a way that both latches onto and challenges the way his hearers have been accustomed to look at life. And he closes by laying before them a forceful summons to turn to the God revealed in Jesus Christ.¹

It is not so far from Athens in the middle of the first century to the places where you and I sit at the end of the twentieth. The attitudes encountered in that city are not so different from views and outlooks at large in our society. It is not necessary to go to our universities to hear echoes of the philosophy of ancient Athens. The polytheism, Epicureanism and Stoicism of that city, and the elements of the Christian gospel that Paul offered in interaction with these Greek ways of thinking, bear consideration as we review our own presentation of the gospel amid

the perceptions and preconceptions of contemporary Britain.

1. Religion of the Greek Gods

'The city was full of idols' (16). 'Men of Athens . . . you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, "To an unknown god." ' (22f) Athens was splendidly endowed with buildings and statues to the pagan deities of Greece, which from an aesthetic perspective were (and are) rated as objects of merit and magnificence, 'among the artistic masterpieces of the world'.² Although the religion of the ancient deities had declined somewhat under the influence of philosophy, and had been replaced by the rise of a 'nebulous monotheism',³ yet the polytheistic background was still much in evidence. Among all this Paul had found an altar inscribed, 'To an unknown god,' and this he uses as the point of departure for his evangelistic proclamation. For an inscription of this precise wording we have no other ancient record, documentary or archaeological, but various writings from the period attest something fairly similar. The second century traveller, Pausanias, for example, writes that in Athens there are 'altars of gods named unknown'.⁴ Why might this sort of thing have been done? To invoke protection? To placate a deity who might otherwise be denied due homage? There seems to be, behind such an action, a conviction

that there are forces with which one cannot but be unacquainted. Life is controlled, at least to some extent, by powers that cannot be known or named. Whether in hope, or in fear, or just in making sure, it is necessary to deal with an unknown god, to reach out and relate to one whom you do not know. It is all very vague, yet it is powerful enough to move men to build altars.

This kind of religion may be called reaching for a god; the Christian counter is to announce a revealed God. 'What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you' (23). 'He has given assurance to all by raising this man from the dead' (31). In the race of belief in, or fear of, an unknown god, Paul offers a God made known, a God of specific and clear revelation, a God with whom we have to do but not in ignorance or vagueness about his ways, a God of resurrection.

2. Epicureanism

'Some also of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers met him' (18). The term 'philosophy' in ancient Greece meant something fuller and wider-ranging than is often suggested by the narrow intellectual application of the word in our own era. Epicureanism was an approach to the living of life, certainly based on a system of thought, but practical in its implications and results, and indeed in its purpose. The Epicurean ideal was of a quiet life; *ataraxia* is the key word, undisturbedness. Live unobtrusively and you will live in tranquillity, without worry. Life is dangerous, don't stick your neck out. Live a detached life, for that is what the gods do. They are made up of fine atoms, living in a perpetual calm in the spaces between the worlds. They are not disturbed by worry, or troubled by concern and involvement in human affairs. And as with the gods, so for humans, the ideal, the supreme blessedness, is the tranquil life, free from pain and passion and perturbation.

If Greek polytheism is to be characterised as reaching for a god, Epicureanism may be said to involve a removing of God—to a safe distance. 'God's exist . . . It is good for man to respect and admire them, but not to expect favours or punishments from them' .⁵ There is no expectation of after-life in Epicureanism. The soul dies with the body, so that neither death nor anything beyond it is to be feared. So there is no ultimate accountability or final judgment. To this Paul proclaims a God involved, rather than detached. Creation is in constant dependence on God for its very life and breath; he is the mainspring, the power source, of the whole continuing life of the natural order. At the same time God is righteous, and will express that righteousness in his work of final judgment. Repentance is his summons. Conduct cannot be shaped by personal convenience alone. An ideal of undisturbedness will not do, because it is based on a fiction, the fiction that life has no ultimate point of accountability and reference. There is indeed such a supreme reference point, the active, authoritative, involved, righteous God. He it is with whom we have to do.

3. Stoicism

This was the other great philosophical school in Athens and, like Epicureanism, had some three or four centuries of tradition behind it. If Epicureanism pictured the gods as distant and separated from this world, Stoicism had a view of the divine as pervasive in all of life. God was seen as the governing principle of life, the pulse that beats in all of nature, the reason behind all human reasoning, and the world-soul within all true thinking. The object of human living is then to come into line with this universal law, to live in accord with the reason who is at the heart of the whole world-order. That is the good, there is virtue, and it is to be found by mental processes. By careful, understanding, and thoughtful direction of one's life it is possible to bring the individual soul into harmony with the world-soul. Reason is supreme over emotion. Thus the individual's quest for good leads into a reasoned, contained, controlled independence of the will and power of others. A key word for Stoic living is *autarkeia*, self-sufficiency.

'Stoicism at its best was marked by great moral earnestness and a high sense of duty'.⁶ However, its theism tended towards the pantheistic rather than the personal. The Stoic conception is of a God who is everywhere. But the one—or perhaps better the principle—found everywhere, does not have all the attributes of the Judaeo-Christian God. God has become contained within the universe. Alongside the popular reaching for a god, and the Epicurean removing of God, Stoicism appears as a reducing of God. It is a thought-system of high ambition and ideal, but of lower theology. In the face of this, Paul speaks of the One who is the disposing, determining, active God in the affairs of people and nations. He is transcendent, supreme and separate. Paul speaks not of universal reason tapped into by human reasoning, but rather of divine will and independence contrasted to human dependence and need. He expands the theology of those whose God is too small.

4. The Gospel for Athens

In summary, then, to the polytheistic superstition that reached out for a god, Paul proclaimed a God revealed and a Lord risen. In place of an unknown god, God known. To the Epicureanism that removed God to a distance, the message was of his summoning righteousness: 'Turn, for God will judge.' God is not detached but is involved and profoundly concerned with the affairs of this world. To Stoic reducing of God comes the declaring of a God who is over the world rather than wholly expressed within it, judging it rather than identifiable with it, to be sought—but in acknowledgment of his transcendence and majesty. Pervasive, yes—but in supremacy rather than in pantheistic containment.

How much of all this relates to the Christian preacher today? Can it be seriously maintained that Greek polytheism, along with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophies, are alive and well now? Or at any rate, can we find, are we beset by, their modern counterparts? Arguably we can, and we are, and we must evangelise among them.

5. The Gospel from Athens

If the altar to an unknown deity, among the shrines of Greek polytheism, testifies to a belief that reality is controlled by forces unknown, superhuman powers that cannot be known or named, then such a belief shows a remarkable durability. For example, the deity who stands guard over the number thirteen is not known or named, but his domain is treated with great respect. How many of our fellow-citizens would choose to marry on that day of the month? Even the apparently hard-headed may be reluctant to live in a house of that numbering. Or again, the star gods are not named in cultic ceremony, but their inanimate doings are closely consulted on the horoscope pages of a host of newspapers and magazines. Many of our neighbours evidently entertain a deep, unarticulated unease that events are controlled by unknown and unnamed powers, and some people make quite an effort to placate, or conform to, or avoid these forces. There is a reaching out, in vagueness of belief, yet in active conviction, to unknown elements in the universe.

Amid all this, the Christian remembers and proclaims God who is known. In Christ we do not reach out to God unknown, still less to God unknowable. We do not stretch out in vague hope that God might act. Our religion is one of constant and continual response to God who has acted. We relate, in confidence and joy, to God known and revealed. We latch onto the resurrection. We worship and announce the risen Jesus. And thus we invite others to know him too.

The Epicurean said 'I lead a quiet, decent, respectable life. I don't bother anyone, and nobody bothers me. I doubt if God has much to be concerned about in what I do—which is alright, because he doesn't trouble me much either.' Such belief is not dead as a creed, as a way of looking at life. Many of us like a quiet life, we do not care much for being disturbed, nor have we any great desire to thrust ourselves into a position where we shall attract attention. Privacy is comfortable. Unobtrusiveness is safe, by and large. Involvement can be costly, and those who choose to stick their necks out have a chance of getting wounded as they do it. And a private, unshared, theism can sit alongside this: God's pretty respectable too. Perhaps the best modern temple to Epicureanism might be a country cottage, far away from it all, a place of privacy and peace—detached of course.

Before this attitude, Christianity can go on to speak of a very different view of God. God involved and concerned, present and active, calls us to join him in committed righteousness and costly love. God is not detached, but near enough to call us to repent and knowledgeable enough to judge us. He summons his people to care, to bother and to act, in relation to the needs of our neighbours; his call is to passionate engagement and practical involvement, to service and sacrifice, in the cause of the cross. He has given us life, but not set us as lords over it with full rights of decision and disposal. He has put it into our hands to steward, not to submerge, nor to spend at our will. Quietness is not enough. Certainly there are times when God may call his servants to quietness, to

withdrawal, to rest and retreat and prayer. But if these things are allowed to supplant God and are pursued for their own sake, they may yield not the peace of God but the vacuum of godlessness. That is the Epicurean *cul-de-sac*; it is smoother, but much shorter, than the Christian road.

And where is the Stoic of this age? If self-sufficiency is the key idea, probably not far away. We emphasise achievement and marvel at enterprise, we respect individual success and the independent spirit that arises from it. Our media take an interest in the self-made and successful man or woman, the one who has gained wealth aplenty, has carved out a personal track of good fortune, and revealed an evident and shrewd grasp of the way the world is. Humility has never been much of a headline grabber. The one who can say, 'I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul,' will always draw our gaze. Then it becomes easy to drift into assuming that the winner's success is testimony to his accord with the values and powers that really matter. God, though perhaps acknowledged, does not have an active or independent role to play. Success is its own validation; who needs heaven's?

Perhaps this attitude applies not just to the highest echelons and most spectacular successes of our society, but is mirrored at other levels too. It applies to anyone for whom things are going reasonably well. The person who has got a grip on life shows himself thereby to be keyed into reality, living in accord with the way things are. He has all the god that he needs. There isn't anything missing, is there? This is *autarkeia*, and this is enough; and this sort of way of looking at life is around us, and—if we are not careful—maybe even within us.

From Athens, to this modern *autarkeia*, comes an affirmation of the greatness of God. God is transcendent and reigning, supreme and separate, alive with his own autonomous life, self-sufficient, omnipotent and mighty. His is the initiative in our world. He is the active One, Maker and Disposer. As for us, our life is characterised by complete and constant dependence for life and breath and all things, by utter smallness, and by the need to seek in repentance a God who has shown himself powerful even over death. Awe is appropriate, rather than pride, the bowed heart rather than the raised head; humility is needed if we are to face holiness; our seeking and our serving, rather than our show of succeeding, are what really count before such a God. Self-sufficiency is not its own justification: it is a mirage if we seek or imagine it for ourselves; only God has it, and we depend totally on him.

6. In Conclusion

The three 'Athenian heresies': an attempt to access unknown forces that govern life, an uninformed attempt that amounts to a kind of superstition rather than religion; the ideal of quietness that draws a person away into a world that is decent and respectable, because of its view of a safely unconcerned and distant deity; and the notion of self-sufficiency that sits alongside a reduction of God-tamed rather than transcendent. Are they alive today, as temptations

for the Christian, seeping into the Christian mind and leading us away from our true confidence, from commitment and reverence? Are they features of the setting within which we evangelise? Let us sustain within our worship and our witness the three Pauline notes of this Areopagus speech. God is revealed and Christ is risen, and so all our religion is a response to the God who has come to us. God is righteous, and Christ will judge the world, and so God summons us to righteous involvement in his service. God is reigning, and awe and reverence are right attitudes before such a one, utterly majestic and holy and on whom we constantly depend. 'Now he commands all men everywhere to repent, 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 men by raising him from the dead.'

Footnotes

1. I take the report given in Acts of the speech and its attendant circumstances to be accurate, though condensed. The most recent defence of this position known to me is that of the late C. J. Hemer in *Tyndale Bulletin*, 40:2, 1989, pp. 239-259—a lucid and erudite article.
2. Hemer, p. 245.
3. For this expression I am indebted to William Barclay; it comes from *Expository Times*, 71:8, May 1960, p. 248, from one of a series of articles on Hellenistic philosophies of the NT era.
4. Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I. 1:4.
5. D. J. Furley, in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd Ed., 1970, p. 391.
6. F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd Ed., IVP and Eerdmans, 1990, p. 377.

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THE 1992 SCOTTISH REFORMED CONFERENCE

Some 230 people representing eight denominations from places as far away as Tain, Wales and London, gathered to the campus of Stirling University this year on Saturday, May 2, for the third Scottish Reformed Conference. There were three speakers: the Rev Iain H. Murray (Banner of Truth Trust), the Rev Alun McNabb (Dudley Baptist Church) and the Rev David Carmichael (Lesmahagow).

Mr Murray took as his subject the Epistle of Jude, from which he showed the character of the false minister of Christ who creeps into the pulpit and who produces an unholy church membership. Our duty in these times, he said, is to build up ourselves in the truth and to keep ourselves in the love of God, with a prayerful expectation of Christ's coming. Mr McNabb spoke on the heart-warming theme: 'Preaching the Joy of Imputed Righteousness'. Artificial 'joy' is being

offered to the modern congregation. What the church must get back to is the true biblical joy of those who are made glad in Christ through the truth. Mr Carmichael preached a passionate sermon on the security which the true believer has through the Name of the Lord. He went through some of the divine Names in the Scriptures, and showed how they all strengthen a believer's assurance.

The messages are available on tape for those who write to: Mr Stanley Berry, 7 Marchmond Gardens, Bishopriggs, Glasgow G64 3DJ. (Cheques to be made payable to 'Scottish Reformed Tapes'. Tapes cost £2 each).

Next year's conference is due to be held on Saturday, May 1st, 1993. Those who wish to be placed on the mailing list or who would like further information should write.