

INTRODUCTION

Christ's apostles were described as "the men who turned the world upside down". In a sense it was true. In Acts 17 we see the methods they used and the results they achieved.

THE BOOK THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

When Paul and his colleagues arrived in Thessalonica they did what they always did in a new place - they went to the synagogue and spoke to the people there. Their discussion focused on the Scriptures. They examined what Scripture said about the promised Messiah, and showed that he was destined to die and rise to life again. Then they spoke about Jesus of Nazareth, and showed that he fitted those prophecies for he had been crucified and had risen again.

Their message was the message of Jesus. The Scripture was their point of contact. It was also their authority, for both they and their hearers accepted its teaching as true. If the Scripture said something then it must be true.

Many of their hearers believed the message of Jesus for that reason. Those who turned hostile and raised a mob did so out of envy. Wrong motives lead to wrong conduct, and the messengers of Jesus became the victims of slander.

The people of Berea were said to be more fair-minded. They did not reject the gospel out of hand but searched the scriptures to find out if it was true. The result was that "many believed". Again, they tested the apostles' message against the scripture.

It is not possible to separate the Christian gospel from the Bible (though some try to do so). It arises out of the Old Testament scripture and is recorded in apostolic New Testament writings. Anything that is inconsistent with that should not be called Christianity.

The message the new believers received was a message of grace. It was so different from their previous hopes of attaining eternal life by their own good works. Their world was turned upside down.

ATHENS - THE PLACE AND THE PEOPLE

Athens was the city of famous philosophers but when the Christian missionaries arrived it was living on former glories. The talk was unproductive. They were 'academic' but not scholars. It was mere talk that led to nothing.

Paul was highly educated, but it was not the famous places that attracted his attention; it was the fact that statues of gods were everywhere. A Roman writer contemptuously said there were more gods than men in Athens.

This idolatry distressed Paul. It was offensive to God. It was a denial of reality. It was an exercise in futility.

Paul must have been grieved for the contempt for God that it showed as well as the human folly that lay behind it. He brought up the subject with people he met, and spoke to them about Jesus and the resurrection.

It was when he got into discussion with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers that events changed course. Some of them believed that God (or the gods) were so remote as to be irrelevant and we should live to enjoy ourselves. The others believed that 'god' was practically the same as the forces of nature (pantheist), which would make people the victim of blind forces they just had to accept. Both beliefs are common today. Both approaches regard religious beliefs as mere cultural expressions, rather than relating to something that is actually there. It has a contemporary ring.

The Christian concept of God sounded alien. Jesus was a real person, and resurrection (if true) would be something intruding on human experience. Paul was summoned to the Areopagus court to have his teaching investigated. They seem to have had an air of intellectual superiority - some dismissed Paul as the sort of person who parroted other people's ideas in a garbled way. Their favourite occupation was to hear and repeat new ideas - talk rather than action. They felt that God/god was an object they could examine rather than a Being who examined them. That would soon be turned upside down.

A DESCRIPTION OF GOD

The Scriptures were no longer a point of contact but Paul used them nevertheless (though his hearers did not recognise his allusions).

According to an ancient writer there were several altars that referred to an "unknown God". That was his point of contact. In mentioning it he was also reminding them of their ignorance. And it gave opportunity to speak in an authoritative way - "I declare him unto you". He was about to tell them about the God whom the scriptures describe. He made five points.

God is personal (unlike the Stoics' notion) and he is Creator. Therefore it is absurd to 'confine' him to a statue or a temple as they did. Some people try to confine him to a segment of their lives, which is just as absurd. This was a critique of their religious views - turning their world upside down.

God is our Provider, giving life and every necessity. That makes religious belief personal rather than merely intellectual. We owe him everything. Do we show gratitude to him? That makes us examine ourselves.

God is Ruler. He is involved to some degree in where and when our lives take place. He could have made us differently. He has given us ample opportunity to find him for he is "not far" from any of us. If we remain ignorant the fault must be ours. We should take the position of learner rather than judging him. Our world is being turned upside down.

God is our Father in the sense of being our Maker - "we are his offspring". He is greater and more powerful, an object of worship rather than of debate. Our attitude to him is being challenged.

God is also our Judge. This is the nail in the coffin of a merely academic approach to religious matters. It forces us to judge ourselves – our dealings with God and with our fellow men. Human judges are not always just (neither are we when we examine ourselves) - he will judge in righteousness. The day and Person have been appointed - so there is a sense of urgency (so different from Athenian languor). There is even evidence of it - God has raised a man from the dead and given him universal authority.

The inevitable conclusion is that we must repent of wrong attitudes to God as well as to our fellows.

THE OUTCOME

Some of Paul's hearers mocked this 'new' message. The idea of resurrection seemed absurd - but they missed the point that its very uniqueness showed it had significance. The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is at the heart of the gospel and the Christian faith.

Others said, "We will hear you again". This message resonates with people. Many who do not believe it wish it were true. It speaks of ultimate justice to a world that groans with injustice. It speaks of hope to a world that knows it must die. It speaks of mercy to a world with a guilty conscience. Even the call to repent is based on the message that God is ready to accept us and forgive us.

All this is an ethical challenge. It is a call to humble ourselves before God instead of judging him. It is a call to receive mercy instead of trying to pay our own way.

Luke writes, "Some believed". That was such an unlikely outcome in a place like Athens. Christ turns the world upside down.