

*Addressing Unbelievers:
Compliment or Confront?
Learning from Paul's Address at the
Areopagus*

Introduction

In fulfilling Christ's command to take the gospel into all the world to see sinners converted, it is but stating the obvious when I say that we can only do this by making real contact with unbelievers.¹ Having made this contact, of course, we have to go further, finding ways of reaching them with the gospel, actually communicating with them. To help us (as they see it) in this, a number of writers are encouraging us to adopt a style which pagans will find acceptable, non-threatening. Confrontation is taboo; conciliation, softly, softly is in. In reaching modern man, new methods, modern methods, are required. So we are being told.

I disagree. I fully accept, of course, that we wear different clothes to the apostles, we have different modes of transport, and all the rest, but I assert without reservation that we today are dealing with the same sort of men and women as the apostles did, and that their methods must be ours.

The audience

Yes, modern man is 'modern'. But he is, beneath his skin, the same as every man (apart from Christ) has been since Adam's fall. Nothing changes here! Man is still as dead in sin as ever he was, as much under the wrath of God as before; he continues to hate God, dismissing the things of God as

¹ In this article, I have lightly edited a mss. of an Appendix to a book I am writing in order to deal more largely with the issue in hand.

foolishness. The scriptural assessment of the natural man stands unaltered:

Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God (Rom. 8:5-8).

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14).

You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (Eph. 2:1-3).

And the sinner's present and, unless he is converted, eternal condemnation could not be more plainly laid out:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil... Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him (John 3:16-19,36).

No wonder then, as Christ stated:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the

kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you: ‘You must be born again’ (John 3:3-7).

And so on. None of this must be glossed over. None of it must be missed. This is what the apostles faced. And so do we. Yet they reached sinners with the gospel and saw them converted, both Jews and Greeks. How did they do it? What did they say? What did they avoid saying? Their methods must be ours. That is my thesis.

In this article, I want to explore this a little by looking at Acts 17:16-34, the record of Paul dealing with pagans – religious pagans – in the Areopagus at Athens. Nothing could be more relevant.

I say ‘religious pagans’, but this, of course, is a tautology; all pagans, all men, are ‘religious’. Oh yes they are – however stoutly they deny it. There are no atheists. Every man has, believes in, and yields devotion to some sort of a god – self, the rational mind, a philosophy, evolution, sex, power, food, money, reputation, self-gratification, or whatever. The list is endless. As Martin Luther said, the great pope is Pope Self. Yes, all men are religious. Those who deny it, deny it religiously!

And so to Acts 17:16-34.

The importance of Acts 17:16-34

I am not alone in asserting the importance and relevance of Acts 17:16-34 in the present context. Take Georges Housney:

Paul’s speech to the Greek philosophers in Athens takes up a space of just eleven verses, yet it has occupied theologians and those interested in evangelism² for decades. There is hardly a book on missions that does not use this story to

² For those ‘interested in evangelism’ Housney had ‘missiologists’.

support a variety of views on evangelistic³ theory and practice.⁴

And Robert L. Deffinbaugh:

The longer I look at the Athenian philosophers, these ancient heathen, the more they look like Americans [the West in general – DG] of today. These Gentile heathen of centuries ago enjoyed the blessings of political freedom in what was one of the earliest democracies. They were cultured, highly intelligent, and educated, and very religious, but they had rejected God and exchanged the worship of the one true God for ‘gods’ of their own. How much like them our non-Christian culture is like. We have more confidence in human reasoning and our search for truth than we do in the one who is the truth, the Lord Jesus Christ. We, as a culture, are always in pursuit of something new and novel.⁵

No wonder then, that, according to F.F. Bruce:

...probably no eleven⁶ verses in Acts have formed the text for such an abundance of commentary as has gathered around Paul’s Areopagus’ speech.⁷

Again:

The bibliography on this discourse is immense.⁸

Ben Witherington III:

This passage is in many regards one of the most important in all of Acts, as is shown by the enormous attention scholars

³ Housney had ‘missiological’.

⁴ Georges Housney: ‘Analysis of Paul’s Acts 17’.

⁵ Bob (Robert L.) Deffinbaugh: ‘The Athenian Encounter and Contemporary Christianity’ in ‘The Apostle in Athens, Preaching to Philosophers (Acts 17:15-34)’.

⁶ Bruce had ‘ten’.

⁷ F.F. Bruce: *The Book of the Acts (Revised Edition)*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1988, p333.

⁸ F.F. Bruce: *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary (Third Revised and Enlarged Edition)*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, (Apollon, Leicester), 1990, p379.

have given it. In fact it has attracted more scholarly attention than any other passage in Acts.⁹

In this article, then, I want to face the question: What does Acts 17:16-34 say about our approach to pagans today? Indeed, I want to polarise it: Should our approach be by way of compliment or confrontation?¹⁰

Paul at the Areopagus

Paul, moved – ‘greatly distressed’ (Acts 17:6), ‘vexed’, ‘grieved’, ‘burning’, even to ‘paroxysm’ – by the idolatry at Athens, took the gospel to the Jews (and proselytes) by reasoning with them in the synagogue (or its equivalent), as was his custom (Acts 9:20; 13:5,14; 14:1; 16:13; 17:1-2,10; 18:4,19; 19:8). Not only in the synagogue, but also in the marketplace, he attempted to engage with as many as showed interest, whether Jews or pagans:

While Paul was waiting for [Silas and Timothy] at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. 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 (Acts 17:16-17).

Some philosophers who were prepared to engage in conversation with Paul, did so to sneer at him:

Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said: ‘What does this babbler wish to say?’ Others said: ‘He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities’ – because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection (Acts 17:18).

By calling Paul a ‘babbling’, they were using a highly-derogatory term – ‘seed-gatherer’, ‘one who lounges in the

⁹ Ben Witherington III: *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, The Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 1998, p511.

¹⁰ I am not appealing for discourtesy, and love must govern all we do, but even so the question is valid. It is the question I want my readers to face.

marketplace, making a living by picking up anything that falls off a cart’, ‘beggarly, abject, a parasite’; above all, ‘an empty talker’.¹¹

However, for their own reasons – maybe for sport in satisfying their predilection for the hearing of any new teaching, indulging their hobby – the philosophers took Paul to the Areopagus to hear more about his ‘new ideas’. They liked his talk – not his doctrine, but his talk. They wanted to hear more. A pleasant diversion for the afternoon or whatever? A kind of the jack-in-the box that would jump about for their intellectual amusement? Oh? Luke recorded the scene:

And they took [Paul] and brought him to the Areopagus, saying: ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean’. Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new (Acts 17:19-21).

Paul’s address

Expectant silence, I should imagine, fell, as Paul stood up (Acts 17:22),¹² and opened his discourse – and on a pejorative note, at that:

Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious (Acts 17:22).

Now this can be misread. It must not. I called this opening ‘pejorative’. Let me explain. Paul was not congratulating his hearers, flattering them by praising their spirituality. Not at all! As the AV (KJV) puts it:

Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things [you] are too superstitious.¹³

¹¹ See Joseph Henry Thayer: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, ninth printing 1991.

¹² Probably motioning with his hand, this seeming to be the usual way of addressing a crowd (Acts 12:17; 13:16; 19:33; 21:40; 26:1).

The Greek word translated ‘superstitious’ can refer to the fear of gods; a good thing, as some would see it, men showing a reverence for the gods, having a sense of piety and religion. Or the word can speak of rank, unadulterated superstition. Joseph Henry Thayer opted for what he called Paul’s use of ‘kindly ambiguity’. Which is it? Was Paul being complimentary? Or, as I have asserted, confrontational?¹⁴

Clifford C.Pond:

When Paul calls them religious (AV [KJV] ‘superstitious’), he is not commending their religion... Paul is disgusted!... The altars and shrines of the pagans were... places of gross immorality in the name of religion.¹⁵

Bruce came down – only just, and very gently at that – on the confrontational side:

This characterisation of the Athenians by Paul was not necessarily meant to be complimentary... The expression Paul used could also mean ‘rather superstitious’... What was piety to Greeks was superstition to Jews.¹⁶

Again:

[The] KJV [AV] [rendering] ‘too superstitious’ is not entirely wrong;¹⁷ to Paul, the Athenian religion was mostly superstitious... Too much stress should not be laid on the likelihood of Paul’s commencing his address with a compliment... On the other hand, Paul would not commence his discourse with an insult.¹⁸

¹³ The ‘too’ is odd. How much superstition is acceptable? ‘Very’ would be better than ‘too’.

¹⁴ For more, see my ‘Confronting The Cultures’; ‘No Mixture! Separation!’; ‘Need Not Want: A Warning’, and so on.

¹⁵ Clifford C.Pond: *Paul... at Athens*, Strict Baptist Mission, Abingdon, p9.

¹⁶ Bruce p335.

¹⁷ But, as I have noted, it is very odd! How much superstition is acceptable? ‘Very’ would be better than ‘too’.

¹⁸ Bruce (Greek) p380.

Of course! I am not for a moment suggesting we insult unbelievers. But flattering them is not the alternative.

I think it is true to say that a majority of commentators come down on the gracious, complimentary side of the meaning of the word which Paul used. Indeed, it may be right (with Thayer) to say that Paul intended a ‘kindly ambiguity’. Nevertheless, my own view (‘it would be’; I can hear the retort) is that Paul was upfront right from the start. I am asserting that, even with his opening salvo, the apostle confronted his hearers. Let me offer some justification for what I allege.

For a start, Paul could never have praised anybody for showing reverence for gods. He could never have congratulated anybody for their devotion to idols. Never! So, if he was using the word in a complimentary sense, he could only have been flattering his hearers. Flattery? Buttering up his hearers? The man of the apostle’s stamp – the man who wrote the following words – would never, in this context, have fallen back on flattery:

We are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ (2 Cor. 2:15-17).

We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor. 4:2-4).

You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you

his gospel in spite of strong opposition. For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed – God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else (1 Thess. 2:1-6).

In any case, whether or not Paul spoke in terms of ‘superstition’ or ‘religion’, he was being confrontational. He was grieved, angry that his hearers should be deluded; he was distressed. While Karl Marx could talk in terms of ‘religion being the opium of the people’, he did not go far enough. Religion is not only a drug, a soporific; it is fatal. Satan likes and uses the institutions of religion (2 Thess. 2:4; Rev. 2:9; 3:9).¹⁹ Paul would never preach religion. He would never encourage religion. He had had more than enough of that in his early days as a Jew:

My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee (Acts 26:4-5).

You have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers (Gal. 1:13-14).

In both passages, the apostle goes on to declare the glorious change he experienced in his conversion to Christ – not to ‘the Christian religion’. He certainly made this clear when he wrote to the Philippians:

¹⁹ This is not confined to Jews and synagogues. Take ‘temple’ (2 Thess. 2:4); see 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:20-22, and so on).

Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh – though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith – that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Phil. 3:2-11).

In the following, when Paul spoke of ‘worship’, he used the word that is translated ‘religious’ in the above, even ‘ritual’, and did so in a critical way:

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship [the word in question] of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind (Col. 2:18).

On the other hand, we do have:

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world (Jas. 1:26-27).

Here, ‘religion’ carries positive overtones. Even so, it is best understood in terms, not of religion, but spirituality, practical godliness: ‘Spirituality that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is...’. What we must not do is read back into the

Bible 1800 years of Christendom, and then read it back out again.

So, apart from James 1:27, and this qualified as in the preceding paragraph, ‘religion’ and ‘religious’ carry negative overtones in the days of the new covenant. Paul, the man who declared the following, would never countenance ‘religion’ as understood by pagan Greeks:

I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (1 Cor. 9:16).

What we proclaim is... Jesus Christ as Lord (2 Cor. 4:5).

If I may accommodate that last verse, in the present context I think it is fair to say that Paul would declare:

What we proclaim is not religion, but Jesus Christ as Lord.

Consequently, I am of the opinion that Paul opened his address at the Areopagus on a confrontational note. He was not being diplomatic, ingratiating himself, congratulating his hearers, winning their confidence, assuring them that all they needed was a bit of tweaking of their ‘religion’. I am sure that both the tone of his voice and his body language would have put this beyond doubt.

Whatever view may be taken of that, it cannot be denied that, as he went on – even immediately – the apostle made his position clear. As always, Paul went for the jugular, doing so without a whiff of ambiguity. For at once he moved to exposing his hearers’ ignorance, their stupidity – their crassness being blazoned abroad for all to see, with their veneration of ‘an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god’ (Acts 17:23)! What ignorance! Moreover, how imprudent of these wiseacres to broadcast it to the world!

Talk about fingers crossed – this is a case of belt, braces and string! Superstition in the raw! Many gods – with one for luck! And Paul exposed it.

As Pond put it:

[Paul] 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 concrete example from their life that exposed their folly, and led him immediately to their relationship with God.²⁰

As the apostle made clear when writing to the Corinthians:

The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart'. Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men...

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory...

Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written: 'He catches the wise in their craftiness'; and again: 'The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they

²⁰ Pond p10.

are futile'. So let no one boast in men (1 Cor. 1:18-25; 2:1-8; 3:18-21).

Paul proceeded to proclaim the one and only God, the true God, to them, rebuking his hearers' ignorance, declaring how God continually works to the end that men might come to him. Quoting back at them – *at them*, I stress – their own poets, the apostle showed, yet again, how witless his hearers were – even their own poets rebuking their madness:

'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' (Acts 17:28).

The point must not be missed. Paul was not quoting the pagan poets on a par with Scripture. Nor was he ingratiating himself with his audience, by quoting their bards with approval. Not at all! Rather, he was highlighting his hearers' inconsistency. He was citing their poets to challenge their thinking! How dim-witted they were, 'being', as they claimed, 'God's offspring', 'to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man' (Acts 17:29)! Fancy! Sophisticated men, men who prided themselves on their rationality, such 'enlightened' men with their vaunted worldly-wisdom, actually making and worshipping an idol crafted out of stone or wood or precious metal and gems! And this, even as they were cherishing the thought that they were, as their own admired-poets declared, this god's offspring! How daft can men get! The cleverest of men are spiritually ignorant (1 Cor. 1:18 – 2:16; 3:18-23), and in saying this, Paul, like Nathan addressing David (2 Sam. 12:7), was pointing straight at his hearers.

Pond again:

Paul's application begins with an unflattering summing up of the condition of his audience. 'Such ignorance' was a brave comment on the intellectual pride of the Stoics and Epicureans of Athens (1 Cor. 1:20-21).²¹

²¹ Pond p19.

Paul had yet more to say:

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people 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 by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30-31).

The material point is that Paul got this far in his first meeting with the pagan philosophers! This was his opening (and, as it turned out, his closing) discourse. Having been given the opportunity, he grasped it with both hands. Paul had no thought of process; no softly, softly, here. Rather, he opened with all guns blazing. A better illustration might be to speak of him, right from the start, drawing his rapier and, deftly wielding it, driving to the very heart of the issue. Obviously, he was not looking for common ground with the world. Not at all! Rather he exposed his hearers' folly. In God's name, he warned them of the coming judgment. He told them of the one who would judge them, the Lord Jesus Christ. He commanded them, in God's name, to admit their error, repent, confess their blindness, and turn. He unequivocally laid out the evidence of Christ's resurrection. In all this he was flying directly in the face of his hearers' so-called wisdom, confronting both them and their 'wisdom' with the truth, confounding both them and their arguments.

Conclusion

In my view, Acts 17:16-34 shows us that we are to approach sinners by confronting them with the gospel, confronting them with Christ. The man of Acts 17 who addressed the Athenian philosophers in the Areopagus is the very same man who did not hold back when issuing the following statements. Do not miss where and how Paul *started* when setting out the gospel:

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to

them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them (Rom. 1:18-31).

Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to

wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:5-10).

Paul always sang from the same song sheet.

What have others thought about Paul at the Areopagus?

Comments from others

Kenneth F.W.Prior:

Although Paul's example [in Acts 17] encourages us to adapt our style to those whom we are out to reach, at the same time we must be quite clear and uncompromising in the truth we proclaim. This... is clear from Paul's labours in Athens. Yet it is always tempting, out of a genuine desire to commend our message to unbelieving minds, to make it palatable by sacrificing or playing down any aspect of the truth that is likely to be unpopular. The New Testament churches were not lacking in those who had succumbed to this temptation. In Galatia, there were the Judaisers who wanted to modify the basic and vital doctrine of justification by faith to accommodate the prejudices of those with a Jewish background.²² At Colossae, there were others who thought the doctrine of Christ's person could be adapted to suit the presuppositions of Greek philosophy. Paul himself had every opportunity to feel the same pressures, as he found that both the preaching of the cross and the resurrection were the objects of ridicule to sophisticated Greeks. But Paul persisted with both truths. The cross was to him the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18), while if he dropped the resurrection, what he was left with was futile (1 Cor. 15:17). The pages of church history are full of examples of Christians trying to bridge the gulf between biblical truth and secular thought, and in the process sacrificing vital points of doctrine.²³

²² The thrust of Galatians is not that there is no justification by the law, but that there is no justification or sanctification by the law. See my *Christ Is All; Sanctification in Galatians*.

²³ Kenneth F.W.Prior: *The Gospel in a Pagan Society: The relevance for today of Paul's ministry in Athens*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1975, p115. As I indicated in the first note in this article, I am working on a mss. dealing with this subject at large. In that book,

Cornelius Van Til:

So then we conclude that even at Athens Paul did virtually the same thing that he had done in Lystra; he challenged the wisdom of the world. He did what later he did in his letter to the Corinthians when he said: ‘Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that [, in the wisdom of God,] the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God through the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe’ (1 Cor. 1:20-21).²⁴

Witherington:

[Acts 17:23] strikes a balance notable throughout this speech between making contact with the audience and condemning their idolatry... This way of putting it is not much different from what we find in Romans 1:20-23... Romans 1:22 says their thinking was futile because they rejected what they could know of the true God from creation and so their minds were darkened... This comports with what is said in Acts 17:27 about pagans groping around in the dark for the true God... The call for repentance at the end shows where the argument has been going all along – it is not an exercise in diplomacy or compromise, but ultimately a call for conversion, after a demonstration of what the Athenians obviously do not truly know about God. Familiar ideas are used to make contact with the audience, but they are used for evangelistic purposes to bolster arguments that are essentially Jewish and Christian in character.²⁵

Housney:

Paul did not approve of Greek philosophy. He did not encourage the Stoics and Epicureans to read their literature in order to find Jesus or to discover redemptive analogies in their literature.

I will show that Prior’s reference to ‘the pages of church history are full of examples of Christians trying to bridge the gulf between biblical truth and secular thought, and in the process sacrificing vital points of doctrine’ could not be more up to date.

²⁴ Cornelius Van Til: *Paul at Athens*.

²⁵ Witherington pp523-524.

Taken in its entirety, Paul's speech was not irenic. On the contrary, though compassionate throughout, it was confrontational and polemic. He was correctional from beginning to end. He confronted their belief system on several fronts.

Houssney's conclusion could not be more pertinent:

The speech Paul gave at the Areopagus has been used to justify some evangelistic²⁶ practices that are clearly not biblical. Paul has been made to say just the opposite of what he actually said in his speech.

D.A. Carson issued some salutary warnings:

What is striking is that Paul does not flinch from affirming the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. And that is what causes so much offence that Paul is cut off, and the Areopagus address comes to an end...

Paul does not trim the gospel to make it acceptable to the worldview of his listeners. For Paul, then, there is some irreducible and non-negotiable content to the gospel, content that must not be abandoned, no matter how unacceptable it is to some other worldview. It follows that especially when we are trying hard to connect wisely with some worldview other than our own, we must give no less careful attention to the non-negotiables of the gospel, lest in our efforts to communicate wisely and with relevance, we unwittingly sacrifice what we mean to communicate.²⁷

Deffinbaugh:

It would seem to me that much of that which characterises our heathen culture characterises the Christian and our Christian culture [that is, Christendom – DG]... Many of the methods, skills and techniques which are taught Christians are really the products of human minds and human inquiry, and not of biblical revelation.²⁸ They are not simple, gospel answers to life's problems, but complex and drawn out processes. They do not have the stamp, 'made in heaven', but

²⁶ Houssney had 'missiological'.

²⁷ D.A. Carson: 'Worldview Evangelism – Athens Revisited'.

²⁸ Sadly, how true! This is precisely the point I address in the aforementioned book I am preparing.

‘made by man’. Let us ever be alert to those subtle human elements which creep into our theology and practice, in the name of religion [that is, in essence, Christendom – DG], but not in accordance with the gospel. How much of our religion and of our worship is but our own adaptation of God’s revelation, or our own re-shaping of God, to make him more to our liking? How much of our worship is God-centered, rather than man-centered, and which focuses on pleasing and serving God, rather than on getting God to serve us, to meet our needs? And how much of our proclamation of the gospel is consistent with Paul’s preaching, the proclamation of a simple, straightforward message of man’s sin and of coming judgment, of Christ’s sacrifice and of salvation for all who would repent and believe? May the gospel shape our worship and our every action, as it did Paul.

Pond:

There must be a place in our approach to modern pagans, whether in personal witness, tracts, addresses, or on radio or television, for finding points of contact. [But] we will avoid every temptation to be popular.²⁹

I have made my position clear. So, I ask again, reader: Does Acts 17:16-34 justify approaching unbelievers with the gospel by way compliment or confrontation? What is your view? What is your practice?

²⁹ Pond p17.