

Paul's Neglected Message

Mars' Hill (Acts 17)

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Even among those who place a great emphasis on Paul, with his unique apostleship and message, there is an amazing neglect of one of his most outstanding messages found in the Book of Acts. I am referring to his message given on Mars' Hill in Acts chapter 17.

There seems to be a great familiarity with the first account that is reported in this chapter: Paul at the city of Berea, with those who nobly searched the Scriptures daily. But when it comes to the next city that Paul encounters, it does not get as much attention as it should.

Paul moved on from Berea to Athens, and while there he gave one of his most remarkable addresses. The content of his message to this group of unbelieving pagans has been far too long overlooked. These words of Paul contain a very rich message. Preserved in the Scriptures, we know that it not only was a challenge to the pagans of Athens, but that it will prove to be a challenge to the members of Christ's Body as well. The real challenge for us in the message that he gave will be whether or not we even have an adequate perception of Paul's core message at all.

Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' Hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you. God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that He is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though He needed any thing, seeing He giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; and hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He be not far from every one of us: for in Him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also His offspring. Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.

And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: because He hath appointed a day, in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by that Man whom He hath ordained; whereof He hath given assurance unto all men, in that He hath raised Him from the dead (Acts 17:22-31).

NO REFERENCE TO SCRIPTURE

We will not be taking an exhaustive look at Acts 17:22-31 by any means. Neither do I intend that we do so. What I desire to do in this short study is to simply cast a little light upon some of the neglected things that Paul declared. This means that we will deliberately pass over many wonderful statements of Paul. Do not allow this reading to be your end of the matter. Study the entire passage for yourself – not missing one morsel of greatness that is contained in it.

Before proceeding, we will take the opportunity to note what Paul *did not* say in his important talk. One of the most significant things about this entire message is the complete absence of any use of Scripture. Not even once does Paul quote the Scriptures. Maybe just as interesting, the only quotation by Paul is one of a heathen poet.

What is so extremely striking about this is that we are often taught that the God-honoring method of communicating with the lost (*i.e.*, “witnessing,” “soul winning,” “preaching,” etc.) is to riddle our “messages” with Scripture references. In some circles, one’s spirituality may even be judged based upon the amount of Scripture memorized and delivered during such an “evangelistic” opportunity.

Really, think about it, can you even image Paul addressing lost pagans and never even reciting a passage from Scripture? If we had such an opportunity ourselves, many of us would surely believe that we were unfaithful and negligent if we “failed” to use as much of the Bible as we possibly could.

Not that sharing the Scriptures is never to be done with the lost, for surely Paul did. But maybe we should learn a little something from Paul here, and not make our conversations with the lost such a *rote and quote* of Scripture. Maybe, like Paul, we should simply seek to find a place of identification with them – in something that they know and understand – something that is in their frame of reference – something that is important to them; just as he did with their idol to the “*Unknown God*,” and their heathen poetry.

Maybe we should learn to talk to our “Athenians” about sports, movies and other cultural and social interests that they may have, and in these things interpret a divine meaning to life, just as Paul did with the people in his day.

Paul Vieira, in his book *Jesus Has Left the Building*, encourages us along these lines, in what he refers to as *cultural literacy*:

We have learned to live without contact with the world. We have created an artificial environment that goes beyond the simplicity of Christian community ... With its own

language and customs, in many cases those who enter this “church culture” from the outside encounter a form of culture shock ...

How well can you read the culture? Do you know how to speak the language of culture? Do you really understand the person with whom you work or go to school? What is the cry in the heart of people who live on your street? They are not going to speak to you in the same way a believer does. Our ability to understand the worldviews of others will enable us to more effectively communicate with them. Culture is the teacher of worldviews and gives the language with which we are able to speak ...

Although as Christians we abide in a new culture called *the Kingdom of God*, we must still know the culture that surrounds us. We are in the world, but not of it. If we are going to be effective in communicating ... to those who move within the limits of their culture, we must be able to speak to them in a language they can understand ...

What aided the apostles in establishing a voice to the people of their culture was that they knew how to adjust their language according to who was listening. An illustration of this can be found in chapter seventeen of the book of Acts ... Paul did some homework during his stay in Athens ...

Could it be that there are people in our lives who are longing to connect with God but just don't know how? Are there things about our culture that provide a springboard for the gospel to be preached and demonstrated? I believe that God has provided exit doors in every culture around the world. These are subtle passageways to finding God, where culture and *the Kingdom of God* intersect. We can possess the insight to locate these portals. They are simply the entry points that provide opportunity for us to share Christ.

Often these entry points are found in the artistic parts of culture. Paul understood this when he quoted the Greek poets in his message that day on Mars' Hill; “*As certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also His offspring*” (Acts 17:28). It's interesting to note that Paul doesn't quote the Bible once in his appeal to the Athenians. They would not have had any point of reference in regards to the Hebrew Scriptures. Paul must have researched the writing of the Greek philosophers and poets in order to be able to speak to that culture. Paul used their own trusted sources as a basis of presenting the gospel of Jesus to those people.

Who are the trusted sources of our culture? Stephen Spielberg, John Lennon, Sting, Michael Jordan, Bono, Eminem, Jennifer Lopez, Larry and Andy Wachowski, J.R.R. Tolkien, and George Lucas, to name only a few. These are the poets, musicians, artists and storytellers of our time. Whether you agree with it or not, these are the trusted sources of our culture. Hidden in the songs, books, movies, sporting events, and cultural phenomena are gateways. Thoughts, ideas, statements, pictures and metaphors that line up with truth in the gospel message are waiting to be interpreted and proclaimed. The followers of Jesus are the interpreters of the divine revelation that God is speaking through culture. Without us, the truth lies there undiscovered. The precious goes unnoticed in the heap of the worthless.

Paul's approach on Mars' Hill is very helpful for believers ... Paul presents God in an all encompassing way. He is not merely the God of a specific religion or ethnicity; the true and living God is the God of all people. Christians these days are often viewed as being narrow-minded and exclusive ...

Paul debunked the understanding that God could be contained in buildings by his statement, "God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands" (Acts 17:24). Paul preached a God that was outside the building ... Paul's God was universal and near to every human heart on the planet.

Now we shall begin our brief journey into some of the neglected aspects of Paul's message to those on Mars' Hill.

THE UNKNOWN GOD

Ignorant Worship

Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you.

Paul begins to talk with them regarding something about which they evidently had an extreme interest: idols. The interesting thing is what he said to them. He said that they worshipped God – the true and living God – but that they just did so ignorantly.

Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you.

He wanted to talk to them about the God that they worshipped, although ignorantly. The word "ignorantly" is an adverb that tells us *how* they worshipped God. They worshipped Him for sure – it was simply done in *ignorance*! So said Paul.

Think of that. If we had been there with Paul, would we have accused the Athenians of *not* worshipping God at all, because they did so before idols?

Let's bring this into our own culture. Would we accuse Catholics (or those of various Protestant denominations) of not worshipping God, just because they might do so ignorantly? Do they not indeed worship, just like those on Mars' Hill, even if it is in ignorance?

What about Jehovah's Witnesses, or Mormons? What about Jews? Or, dare we say Muslims? Could these be any "worse" worshippers than the idol worshipping men of Athens? Is it not true that they worship God, just ignorantly?

What a different perspective this has on things! Paul said "let me tell you about Him!" This would surely seem like high-heresy to one raised in Christian fundamentalism. I know. I would never have thought I would see things this way; but here we have the very words and example of Paul himself.

Those who “worship” in ignorance, nonetheless worship the true and living God; thankfully, ignorance is curable – and sooner or later “every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess to God” (Romans 14:11).

The truth of this would do away with denominational and religious division and hostility in the heart of the believer. I do not speak here of ecumenicalism, but of being *outside* of the religious barriers and bondage, and being free to love and accept others, exactly where they are.

Not in Man-Made Temples

Seeing that He is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands.”

Why, this statement would manage to get most of Christendom stirred all out of sorts; but it’s true: God does *not* live in man-made structures of any kind.

Would Paul count our contemporary Christianity – with its “House of God” and “Sanctuary” – among the likes of the pagan temples of Athens? Are not these Christian “Houses of Worship” just as pagan, and as heathen as those of Athens?

Yet there is really *good news* in all of this. God does not live in humanly devised architecture. We do not need to “go” somewhere to “meet” Him. For truly,

*In Him we live, and move, and have our being.*¹

THE NEARNESS OF GOD

The reason that there is no need for man-made temples (or other places of worship) is because God is already near to all of us.

Kinship of Man

He ... hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth.

Paul taught that all men are of the same family – “*of one blood.*” The truth of this would do away with social and racial division and hostility in the heart of the believer.

Feeling After God

If haply they might feel after Him.

Some of our brands of Christianity could not appreciate these words of Paul. Men were designed and placed by God in a way that they “*might feel after Him.*”

1. See *Where on Earth Is God?*, Clyde L. Pilkington, Jr., *Bible Student's Notebook* #45.

Christianity-in-a-Box is often quick to discount the work of God in the lives of those outside of its own group-norm. God's drawing of mankind is a lifelong – and even beyond that (in resurrection) – work. We must not be too quick to pass judgment on those, who in ignorance, nevertheless, “*might feel after Him.*”

Not Far from Everyone

Though He be not far from every one of us.

We would not have been surprised if we had read this spoken to the righteous, godly Ephesians; but this was not spoken to them. We don't find this message recorded in the letter to the Ephesians, or to any other group of saints for that matter. No, this was spoken to lost, pagan Athenians!

We like to think of God as being very “near” to *us* (and *our* group), but so very “far” from *them* (and *their* group); but the fact is that Paul told the pagans of Athens that God was “*not far from every one of us.*”

Paul's message was that God is near to “*every one,*” but that is not all. Paul did not say, “*every one of YOU;*” He said, “*every one of us.*” Paul placed himself – along with the Athenians – in the single, worldwide class “*us*” of mankind.

God is close to ALL of “*us.*” This is because,

God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself (II Corinthians 5:19).

The truth of this would do away with the “*us*” and “*them*” division and hostility in the heart of the believer.

We Live in Him

In Him we live, and move, and have our being.

Again, we would not have been surprised to have read this spoken to the Ephesians, but this too was spoken to unbelievers. One can hardly believe it, and we would not, if it were not from the very mouth of Paul, our apostle.

The simple fact is that *all men* are ALREADY in the presence of God; we *live* there! It is not some place that we “*go*”: it is some place that we simply “*are.*” He is where we – all of us – live and move and have our being.

What a wonderful thing it is to “*live*” in the Father. What an amazing thing it is to “*move*” in Him. What an astonishing thing it is to “*have our being*” in Him.

Each and every one of us has the privilege to live in the REALITY of this union with our Father

– as each new day begins and unfolds. What a blessed thing to be in constant communion with Him – heart to heart. This union is ALREADY *fully* ours, secured and maintained by *His* very own nature.

What an impact upon our lives this would have if we were only to embrace it in simple faith.

THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD

God's Offspring

For we are also His offspring.

Again, this is not spoken to believers, but to pagan unbelievers.

Can we believe that Paul would say this? We would not bat an eye if it were said of saints; but for Paul to quote a pagan poet, and then verify that in truth “*we*” – again Paul grouping himself *with them* – are all the offspring of God, is absolutely astounding.

As certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also His offspring. Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God ...

Paul's point is unmistakable. The word “*offspring*” here is also translated in the *King James Version* as “*kindred*” (Acts 4:6; 7:19), “*of the stock*” (Acts 13:26; Philippians 3:5), and “*born*” (Acts 18:2, 24).

Just think of it! “*The offspring of God.*” Could we even have fathomed such a worldwide declaration as “*we are the offspring of God*”?

Following the *King James* translational suit, we have,

WE are the offspring of God

WE are the kindred of God

WE are of the stock of God

WE are the born of God

Let's have the courage of faith, then, that we too, along with Paul, can tell those that we meet that they belong to God, that they are His children, and that He – in truth – *is* their Father.

The truth of this would also surely do away with all manner of division and hostility in the heart of the believer.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

Repentance

God ... now commandeth all men every where to repent.

The Pauline call to “repentance” is the call to *rethink* everything we *think we know* in light of the truth of God. It is the call to accept the divine viewpoint over human viewpoint – a radical change of mind.²

In the context of Paul’s words here, he is telling his hearers that their Father is enjoining³ them to have a change of mind about Him! Surely the words of Paul to the Athenians constituted a completely different way of thinking! This repentance was not just needed for the men on Mars’ Hill. I suggest that even for those who *think we know* our Bible today, we are finding that we too, are in many ways worshipping a God that we do not know very well, that we have been quite *ignorant* of Him ourselves.

Worldwide Righteousness

Judge the world in righteousness.

We are often led to think of the word “judge” as a term of condemnation. The fact is that the word for “judge” simply means to “rule.” It is the same Greek word translated “judging” in Matthew 19:28 where the Twelve Apostles will sit on twelve thrones, “judging” (ruling; governing) the Twelve tribes of Israel. It is just in the same manner that Old Testament Israel had “Judges” in the past as their national leaders.⁴

For now, “*the whole world lieth in wickedness*” (I John 5:19); but,

He hath appointed a day, in the which He will judge [govern] the world in righteousness by that Man [the Lord Jesus Christ] Whom He hath ordained; whereof He hath given assurance unto ALL MEN, in that He hath raised Him from the dead (Acts 17:31).

Faith to All Men

He hath given assurance unto all men.

2. The word “repent” here is *Strong’s Greek Lexicon* #3340 “*metanoeo*,” meaning, “to think differently ... *i.e.*, reconsider.”

The word *repent*, from the Greek word *metanoia*, actually means a change of mind – a radical revision and transformation of our whole mental process ... receiving a new mind. – Jim Palmer, *Wide Open Spaces* (2007), p. 75.

3. The word “commandeth” is *Strong’s Greek Lexicon* #3853 “*paraggello*,” meaning “to transmit a message, *i.e.*, (by implication) to enjoin.”

Noah Webster says of *enjoin*: “as a parent enjoins on his children the duty of obedience” – *American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1828.

4. The word “judge” here is *Strong’s Greek Lexicon* #2919 “*krino*,” meaning “to distinguish, *i.e.*, decide.”

The word “assurance” here is so translated only twice in the *King James Version* from the Greek word “*pistis*;⁵” but it is translated 241 times as “*faith*.”

Thus, the *Concordant Version* translates it as,

Tendering faith to all.

Tyndale translated it,

Faith to all men.

God has “given *faith* unto all men” – “according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of *faith*” (Romans 12:3). It is the blindness of *ignorance* that keeps this faith from embracing the true nature of its Father. One day, the *ignorance* will be completely dispelled and this “*faith*” will “*repent*” (think differently), so,

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10-11).

What a message of hope. What a message of confident assurance. Paul’s message on Mars’ Hill faithfully represents the glorious *good news* given to him for all mankind, of God’s work in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, committed to Paul the Apostle, is truly better *good news* than any of us could ever have imagined! It is far more glorious than religion would ever have us believe!

God’s purpose of the ages will not be complete until His full creative bounty is restored so that He is “*All IN all*” (I Corinthians 15:28).

I trust that you will be at liberty to set aside religious paradigms and enjoy the amazing riches of Christ’s finished cross-work!

5. *Strong’s Greek Lexicon* #4102, translated “*faith*.”

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