

The Chapel Ministry



CLEARCREEK
CHAPEL

Ministry in Actions from Acts

Russ Kennedy

*S*avoring the *S*upremacy of *G*od
*S*tudying the *W*ord of *G*od
*S*haping the *P*eople of *G*od
*S*preaching the *G*ospel of *G*od

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Introduction

A new ministry year is upcoming starting in September. This brief, 3 message study is aimed at helping us think about the dynamics of ministry basics from a short section in Acts. It is not meant to offer new, profound insights into how the Spirit moves in ministry. Sometimes, we, all of us, just need a refresher on the basics to help us and energize us for those things that are at the core of what we do.

We will be emphasizing in the coming year, strengthening our evangelism, so it is this particular dynamic that I want to focus on in these three texts.

The danger in this is that we will take the texts, lift them out of the book and bend them to a use that the Spirit does not intend in the flow of the book. I pray and ask that you pray, that God will help us to unpack the Scriptures with real integrity. Yet we want to plow deep and engraft the simple dynamics of these texts in our hearts

The plan for our study is as follows:

7/23/2000	Spreading the Word of the Lord	Acts 13:42-52
8/20/2000	Building a Biblical Church	Acts 14:19-28
8/27/2000	Preaching to Pagans	Acts 17:22-34

July 17, 2000
Pastor Russ

Spreading the Word of the Lord

Acts 13:42-52

Introduction

It was a bright Saturday morning. The dust was just beginning to rise from the market going feet of the throngs. Here and there among the people could be seen the happy movement of families and folks headed toward the synagogue. As they entered and sat, they noted the presence of guests among them, one of whom was evidently a Rabbi, a teacher. The service moved with careful detail through the time-honored traditions. The chief of the synagogue took the scrolls of the Law and the Prophets, opening them with reverence and the honor due to such ancient and God-given words. As the reading came to an end, his gaze rested on the guests as he called for any word of exhortation from the congregation

One of the guests rose and acknowledged the presence of both Jews and Gentiles. With a clear voice and compellingly Biblical logic, he began to rehearse the earliest history of Israel. Heads nodded in knowing affirmation. This was both familiar and fertile ground for corporate memories. But that history suddenly took a strange turn. The speaker told of a man who had come to fulfill the prophecies and who had been crucified without cause. And he had risen from the dead. These guests had been sent to announce the good news.

The message of Paul came to a thundering close as he invited his hearers to believe and be forgiven and justified because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Sensing the beginning of a rising up against the gospel, he warned them that they must not reject this work God had done as he quoted from Habakkuk 1:5.

The service came to a close. People excitedly pressed together to ask questions and many eagerly strained to hear the words that had so strangely awakened their hearts. But the time had come and the synagogue leaders firmly closed the doors to send the crowd to their homes. Pressed hard, their clothes being tugged and pulled at amid the chattering pleas for more instruction, Paul and Barnabas made their way out into the street.

Its Initial Response

(v.42-43)

Two groups of people can be seen here in this paragraph. Both groups are important in this story. Luke does not mean for us to see one as bad and the other as admirable. Rather, at the initial thrust of the gospel, there will be two kinds of favorable responses.

The Interested Listeners

(v.42)

There were those who wanted to hear more. They were not just casual listeners, but rather entreated and begged Paul and Barnabas to tell them more. They were intrigued by the words of the message. But they were willing to wait till the next Sabbath to hear these words.

The Committed Disciples

(v.43)

Then there were those who followed Paul and Barnabas and were exhorted to continue in grace. More than mere hustling after Paul in the crowd and trailing along behind him – no, here are true disciples.

So will it be today as we spread the Word of the Lord. There will be those who may find what we say interesting or challenging intellectually. Some may be pricked in conscience. Some may be being awakened and convicted. And others will become committed followers who need exhortation and encouragement to stay steadfast and cling to grace.

Its Climatic Conflict

(v.44-47)

So a week passes. We are not told in Luke's economy of words what that week was like. I do not imagine that Paul and Barnabas lounged it away at the local Holiday Inn Express, swimming, taking in the sights and wandering about the *agora* to see what they might buy. The town was well on its way to being thoroughly good-newsed.

The Enthusiastic Crowd

(v.44)

The synagogue scribes frown at one another as they approach their building. They are astonished at the enormous crowd that has gathered, not just Jews and pious Gentiles, but nearly the whole city has turned out...

Look at the words here. The whole town has gathered. They have come to hear the Word. This is the effect of witnessing and spreading the Word of the Lord where it has not been heard before. It is easy to see why Paul wanted to go where the Name of Christ had not been named. He wanted to pour the seed in new and fertile soil.

The Impassioned Opposition

(v.45)

The green-eyed dragon moves stealthily in hearts and stirs up jealousy and envy. Here is the corrosive effect of a jealous heart. They hear the good news and glorious truths Paul and Barnabas have begun to declare. They hear the Word being preached and questions answered. They hear the declaration and the dialog.

But the leadership begins to contradict what is being said, going so far as to slander Paul (more probably the meaning of blaspheme [NASB]). There is a two-pronged response. They attack Paul's content and his character. Luke records this to show that the opposition to Jesus as Lord and Messiah arose from the Jews all over the empire. It was not just a Jerusalem local phenomenon. That the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament were fulfilled in this person who lived in simple obscurity and died in a criminal's execution was just beyond comprehension. That the forgiveness of sins and justification with God was not just among the Jews, but open to the Gentiles, even to any who would believe even if they did not adopt the Jewish faith and life- well, this Way would be opposed. Horribly, in opposing Paul and his teaching, they were opposing God and His purposes.

Let us never forget this. When the gospel begins to be declared in such a clear way that the religion and culture are being exposed, then there will be opposition. It is precisely the hunger to be accepted by the world that has eviscerated the message among evangelicals. In our world and culture today, we must continue to declare that there is salvation in none other for there is no other God than the God of the Bible. Bible believing Christians do have THE TRUTH. Let us then declare with humble clarity and authority and pray God attends our preaching with His Spirit and blessing.

The Significant Turning Point

(v.46-47)

This is one of those startling turning points in the story of the Bible. In the midst of the public opposition by the synagogue leaders, Paul takes their actions as representative of the corporate position of all Israel. Thus begins the practical outworking of Paul's apostleship to the Gentiles.

IMMEDIATE CAUSE (v.46). There is a clear and deep rejection of the Word of the Lord. They decisively pushed themselves away from the Word. In God's purpose and plan, the initial spread of the Word of the Lord was to go to the scattered Jews all over the *Diaspora*. The Word came to the Jews in Israel first from Christ and then from the church. Now, those scattered would also have the opportunity to hear the good news. But they repudiated the Word from God and thus brought upon themselves the judgment of God and demonstrated they were unworthy of the eternal blessings promised and prophesied. Here is an

ultimate irony: in attempting to preserve what God had promised them, they actually rejected it and lost it.

So there is a decisive turning to preach the good news to the Gentiles. That the message makes this turn means that God has made this turn. There is almost a sense of "you had your chance, now on to someone else..."

BIBLICAL CONTENT (v.47). Paul and Barnabas cannot simply make this sort of redemptive historical move without clear justification from Scripture. Paul has his commission from God to be the Apostle to the Gentiles while in him beats a heart for Israel's salvation. It seems to me that he has long meditated over texts that would point to and authenticate his calling from God. So when this decisive moment comes, the announcement does not come on a whim, but at the end of long reflection and deep understanding into the redemptive-historical purposes of God.

So he turns to quotes from Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6. The words he uses are in both texts and thus through them runs a melodic theme that has become the symphony of Paul's life and ministry. Turn to those texts with me... So what does Isaiah see here through the telescope of prophecy? He sees the Messiah being raised up to be a light to the Gentiles so salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. Thank God for Isaiah's vision and Paul's decisive turning and God's great, sovereign purposes *that have brought us Gentiles salvation*.

Its Ordained Responses

(v.48-52)

In our jaded, gospel hardened culture it is so rare to see this sort of response, it is hard to imagine. O, yes, we have lots of religious enthusiasm masquerading as a joyous belief. But where is the sense of unworthiness – of surprise and joy that God had actually chosen to provide salvation for us.

An Appointed Belief

(v.48)

So the Gentiles began to glorify the Word of the Lord by receiving it with joy. This is the way God and His Word is best glorified – when we receive Him and His Word with joy.

A Believing Response

Here is the effect of what God has appointed and done. People believe. Simple, isn't it. Exercise faith – believe God in an obeying way. Yet it is utterly beyond the ability of sinful man. God's gift of faith and repentance (Ephesians 2:8-9) is a part of God's enabling grace in salvation. Those in whom God is doing His saving work – they believe.

A God-Initiated Cause

They believe because they were appointed by God to do so. They believe, not because of some power or ability or insight on their part. They believe as an effect of something God has initiated in eternity past. It is so simple here.

- As many as – all of them and not one more. The circle of God's appointment both encloses and excludes. Even in this text, the visible people of God, the Jews, are rejecting the Word while the pagans are accepting it with God glorifying joy!
- Had been appointed – God's divine appointment stands behind their belief. God has drawn up a plan and set things in order that included their being given life, faith and repentance. The phrase is a part of the doctrine of election and is reflected and filled out in Ephesians 1, Romans 9-11 and numerous other texts.
- To eternal life – God has chosen and appointed people to eternal life. It is what He has chosen them for. Here is the end. Now let me correct a common misuse of this phrase: Luke is not saying that belief is the appointed way to eternal life. That is true but not what this text says. God's to eternal life appointment determines to whom God will give faith.
- Believed – there is something that man does, he exercises the faith that God gives out of God's appointment. What we do in our preaching and witnessing is to tell people what is to be believed and exhort them to believe. These are God's ordained means by which He gives faith/belief to His chosen.

Luke interprets the spread of the Word in a sovereign grace grid. There are those who are interested listeners. There are those who are passionately opposed. There are those appointed to life who believe. They believe because, as Luke will later record, God has opened their heart to believe (Acts 16:14).

An Effective Spread

(v.49)

Now, we cannot say that since all this is God's initiative, then we have no responsibility to preach the gospel. Everyone who is appointed to life will believe so why should I work to witness and expose myself to the ridicule and scorn that will come with? Because everywhere the Bible commands and commends our witness. Right on the heels of this great sovereign grace statement we a text where the passive voice indicates that it is people working to spread the Word while God is pushing it forward in His own sovereign power and purpose.

So do not excuse yourself from your responsibility based on these truths. Spread the Word of the Lord everywhere and those whom God has appointed will believe and be saved.

An Instigated Persecution

(v.50-51)

The Jews opposition to Paul and Barnabas and the gospel now turns to an active conspiracy. They *incite* some and thus *instigate* a persecution that ends in an *expulsion* from the district. As we read on, these people are relentless in their pursuing Paul and Barnabas from city to city. So the opposition to the gospel begins in the houses of worship and ends up in the halls of power. If they cannot win the debate by dialog and logic and truth, they will win with force.

Paul and Barnabas respond with the accepted ritual that is equivalent of our "dusting our hands off of _____." They shake the dust off as a protest against the powerful and political opposition to the gospel.

A Continual Joy

(v.52)

The disciples here are the true converts, the appointed believers, the committed followers all through this text. They are filled with joy and the Holy Spirit, not as two separate experiences or things, but as deeply connected. Fullness of the Spirit overflows in joyfulness, even in the midst of this sort of opposition. The receiving of the Word in joy begins a life that continues in Spirit and joy. And this is God glorified.

Conclusion

Let us be faithful in spreading the Word. Share it across your relationships. Declare it in your teaching. Arguing for it and insist on it with the religious. Be humbly clear and speak with authority.

Our faithfulness in spreading the Word will see the fruit of those who do believe.

May we, all of us, receive God's word with joy, and thus glorify God.

Building a Biblical Church

Acts 14:19-28

Introduction

AP Wire: Lystra, the Roman Empire – The city of Lystra experienced one of the most amazing visitations in recent memory yesterday. A well-known man who had been crippled from birth was miraculously healed by two men who are traveling Jewish Rabbis. The crowd acclaimed them to be the gods, Zeus and Hermes, which the men vehemently denied. Our own investigations with eyewitnesses verified the healing and that the sacrifices had been brought to the city gate. However, the scene turned ugly later as the crowd was incited by other traveling Rabbis who declared the whole thing to be a sham. Eventually, the chief speaker of the two was taken out by the crowd and stoned to death. Now, it is reported that the man (we have discovered that his name is Paul) was reported to now be alive and speaking to groups in the city who are following the way of religion they teach. Some have said that it merely appeared that he was dead from the stoning and was resuscitated while others are saying that he arose from the dead. We have largely been unable to verify either story. We do know that this man Paul is alive, but he has so far been unavailable for comment and unwilling to grant us an interview. Watch this space for further developments.

This fictional news clipping captures the story line of chapter 14 in Acts. We are deeper into the first missionary journey and the pioneer impact of the gospel in a pagan and pluralistic society. Here in Lystra, Paul and Barnabas are establishing and building a Biblical and God-honoring church. What important categories do we find Luke identifying in their ministry? In building a Biblical church, there is:

Expectation of Suffering

(v.19-20)

I want to be careful here lest we establish a particular form of suffering as being the norm rather than the principle. Further, we must guard against the establishing of the idea of suffering while all the while going to great lengths to avoid it!

The Fleeting Nature of Popularity

Verse 19 ought to stand large in our thinking when we strive to be accepted and popular. Paul and Barnabas were at first acclaimed and accepted because of the supernatural exhibition of healing power. Their acceptance had little to do with true discipleship. And the crowd was easily swayed to the point of being incited to stone the very ones they had almost accepted as being human deities.

The Enduring Quality of Perseverance

What strikes me here is that Paul and Barnabas refuse to allow the immeasurable suffering to deter them from what God has called them to do. As a result, there is an authenticity to their ministry.

Imagine what is being conveyed here. Luke's understatement is stunning. It is almost as though Paul has edited this to keep the picture plain and simple. But beloved, he was dragged outside the city. There, the stones thudded with horrible bruising crunches. On and on they rained on his head and body until he lay, bloodied and apparently lifeless.

The crowd left leaving the newly won disciples standing about. Do you wonder what was running through their heads? Then he stands and goes into the city. The Scriptures hide the slow, painful walk that must have been. Yet, Paul is going to explain that discipleship involves just this sort of suffering (v.22).

Growth by Evangelism

(v.21)

The New Testament church grows by evangelism. In many churches this is effectively all that goes on which may well mean that it is actually not really happening. In some churches, it never happens because there is just an awful lot of theological navel gazing. What Paul and Barnabas are engaged in and modeling is Biblical efforts in evangelism.

The Preaching of the Gospel

In our day, as in theirs, what appears to be obvious must now be pointed out, called for and motivated. In this day, the preaching of the gospel to reach the lost is considered naïve, simplistic and unworkable. People won't listen and they won't understand when they do. So we have to adapt methods that will reach them better. Now understand me – we need to be innovative and imaginative in our methods as long as our methods do not change or supplant the message. What I fear today is that the reliance on the methods has gutted the message so that the gospel is actually little preached. Most of what is preached today under the guise of the gospel almost never is.

But there is actually little difference from their day to ours. It is quite evident in the context that the pagans to whom the gospel was coming woefully misunderstood both the nature of God's powerful works and God's preached words. They wanted to turn the messengers into objects of worship, identifying them with their own cultural myths, idols and icons. Yet this does not deter Paul and Barnabas from continuing to preach.

Here is a core value for a Biblical church: In the midst of ever changing culture and innovative ministries, *WE WILL PREACH THE GOSPEL* with authority, clarity and humility.

The Making of Disciples

How do I know that the gospel is being little preached today? Because one of the primary aims in evangelism now is decisions, not disciples. Notice what it is that Paul and Barnabas are aiming for. They came and preached and had made many disciples. Nothing in any of the texts in Acts shows us an evangelism that is decision oriented. It is discipleship oriented. It calls for a deep commitment to God and to His Kingdom. It explains that there will be demands and suffering and possibly cruel hardship and persecution. It is an evangelism that challenges the easy professions and confronts them with Jesus as Lord.

So let me say this to you this morning. Some of you need to weight carefully whether all you have is a *decision for Christ* or whether you have become a *disciple of Jesus*. Discipleship means trusting and obeying the Lord. It means baptism and identifying with God's kingdom and his people. It means membership for participation in ministry and accountability in discipline. It means being actively engaged in serving God in His kingdom within the church, which is more than merely coming to church, even regularly. It means involvement in flocks, regular disciplines of Bible study, prayer, giving and sacrificial efforts to meet others needs. Discipleship shifts from what *I can get out of it* to *what I can put into it*.

So I call you to discipleship. Some of you have never been Biblically baptized. Many of you have never become members here. Many of you come faithfully to services, but that is all. You are not involved in SALT (flocks) nor are you serving in ministry. It is our responsibility in disciple making to encourage and exhort you to observe all that the Lord has commanded us.

Development by Discipleship

(v.22)

How are disciples of Jesus to grow in grace? By further discipleship. What we see in verse 22 is a brief description of some of the elements that make up Biblical discipleship. It is a snapshot, and therefore is not exhaustive. But it shows that discipleship began immediately and was necessary for the development of the church.

Through Edification

This is described in the words, the *strengthening of souls*. What a great way to describe both the process and the product of discipleship. It is a soul strengthening work. This is why we call discipleship in our counseling, the care of souls. It is targeted on the inner man to build-

ing up the souls of believers so that they receive strength in the inner man for the testing, trials and temptations that will come to the outer man. O how we long to see you, week-by-week, day-by-day, stronger in your souls for all that honors God at home, work, school and church.

Through Encouragement

This is described as, *exhorting them to continue*. This is the ministry of encouragement. What an important element of discipleship this is. In the face of all the difficulties and the discouragements that attend them, we need the kind of exhortation that encourages us to continue. There is both an identification with their situation and their needs as well as strong words that act like fuel in failing hearts to fan faith and faithfulness. Learn this well. This is why we cannot survive alone. You need the encouraging exhortation of people who know you well enough to spur you on in love and good works.

Through Explanations

Now understand that they need to be strengthened and encouraged because they had just seen what following Christ could well cost them. So they need an interpretive grid. They need explanations. And here is a core explanation: entering the kingdom means tribulations. Luke is capturing here Paul's consistent way of representing Christian living as a present unfolding of an eschatological kingdom whose consummation in completeness is in the future. In other words, we are entering a kingdom now and that involves trouble and tribulation now because the fullness of glory will come later.

A Biblical church will be discipling people. If it does not strengthen souls, encourage steadfastness and provide Biblical ways of interpreting and understanding life, people will turn to insufficient substitutes provided by the world, eventually crumbling under the pressures.

Establishment of Elder Governance

(v.23)

Building a Biblical church involves the establishment of a Biblical leadership structure. At first, this might appear to be easy. But the language here ought to arrest us and cause us to carefully think about what is being said. At the Chapel, we take the establishment of a Biblical leadership and governance very seriously. We believe that there is a system of leadership and governance taught in the Scripture and that we want to understand it, articulate it and implement here.

There are many of you who are new to us here over the last year. So I want to take just a bit of time here to give you a mini-lesson on church leadership and governance, as we understand it now. I must say it that way because some of what I am about to say is not reflected

in the church constitution (which is being revised) and there are some things in the church constitution that are extra-Biblical (that is, they may be allowed by but are not necessarily Biblical).

The Distinctives of a Biblical Leadership

I want to begin with what are mostly positive statements of what the Bible teaches elders are. The key text is Acts 20:17ff.

- The church is governed or overseen by a team of qualified men called elders. The elders are the pastors of the church, its shepherds. A church is to be led by a plurality of elders. There is no Biblical support for the idea of there being only one pastor in a church.
- All elders/pastors must be qualified Biblically. The qualifications for an elder are those of a godly man as well as being able to teach. The elders are to be servant leaders.
- The authority of elders is invested in the elders as a body, not in individual elders. However, when an elder (or any recognized teacher in the church) stands with the Bible, the authority of the Word is being mediated through that teacher.
- Elders are to govern the church. We do not use the word "rule" due to its misuse in many Christian circles. By God's grace, Biblical elders oversee and govern under God's Word with humility and charity.
- Elders are to shepherd the church. For us, this means that each elder has a flock in the church who he is to teach, care for, counsel and encourage. All elders are to shepherd or they are not true elder/pastors.
- Some elders will be supported vocationally in order to give themselves completely to the work of the ministry. Teaching and governing elders are given the priority in the selection of who to support.
- Elders are selected and appointed to the office by the elders, with the affirmation of the church. Elders are not elected and do not run for office.

The Differences in a Biblical Leadership

Now, we must also say what a Biblical eldership is not. We must do this because those of you who grew up in most churches have some rethinking to do. Further, those of you who did not grow up in a church and who are used to an American system of politics or business, you will also have to simply set aside some cherished notions that may work well in a fallen world but are not to be a part of God's kingdom.

- The authority given to the elders comes from God in the Word, not from the congregation. The ultimate authority is not vested in the people, but in the Word of God. Though there is a place for congregational decisions (discipline being one of them), the church is required to submit to the elders as a body.
- There is no single person who is in charge. There is no CEO of the church. This is why I constantly correct you when you refer to me as "the pastor".
- All elders are shepherds or pastors. This is one of the hardest for most people. We tend to think of pastors as being full or part time staff and elders as lay people. Though the Bible distinguishes between those who are supported and those who are not, it never ever applies the title *pastor* to one group and *elder* to the other. So it is not that Russ is the pastor and all the rest of the men are elders. We are all elders. I serve in a particular role among the elders. I am presently supported in my work.
- We do not believe that pastors preach and shepherd while elders administrate. If you come from a Presbyterian background you will need to rethink the pastor and ruling elder model that prevails there.
- There is no separate office of pastor-teacher as though the church has three offices: pastor-teacher, elder and deacon. Among the elders, we have identified a role for an elder particularly gifted and able in teaching and preaching and desire to support the elder in that role vocationally. This role among the elders has been given the title of Pastor-Teacher. We continue at present to do that in order to have some recognizable interface with the culture and with the larger Christian world.
- Though I am a leader among equals, I have no more vote, power or say than any other elder. No elder has individual authority; the authority rests in the elders as a body.
- A seminary education, though desirable, cannot Biblically be a requirement for eldership/pastors. A though knowledge of the Bible and an ability to communicate is an absolute must.

Now, look again at verse 23 and see how it reflects all these principles. The elders are appointed by the apostles, establishing the principle of leadership appointment. There are elders (plural) in every church (singular) establishing the principle of plurality. There are no "pastors" nor "pastor-teachers" mentioned. It is simply assumed that the elders are the pastors.

Now, let me encourage you then to pray for your pastors, to submit to them, to encourage them with appreciation, to get to know them per-

sonally and to seek them out for shepherding care and counsel. And pray for us as a body of elders that we will together govern in a God-honoring way.

Empowerment by Grace (v.24-26)

Luke now brings us to this most important of points in verses 24-26.

The Description of their Ministry (v.24-25)

Briefly, here is a description of the travels and the toil of their ministry. They go from place to place preaching the Word. It is a pioneering, Word-centric ministry. As such it establishes what is to be at the center of building a Biblical church: the ministry of the Word. Whether it is the public ministry of the Word in preaching and teaching or the private ministry of the Word in discipleship (including evangelism), we exist as the Chapel to minister the Word of God.

The Dynamic of their Ministry (v.26)

They had been entrusted to the grace of God for the work they were sent to do. The enabling power for the building of Biblical churches is the grace of God. God's grace is both His free favor to us and His enabling power in us.

Notice how Luke writes this: the work they had accomplished was enabled by the grace to which they had been commended. How refreshing in this day of ten-thousand books on How-To techniques for doing God's work. Are we against techniques? Absolutely not. Ministry at the Chapel is not a free-for-all of each one doing what is right in his own eyes. We work here to establish our purposes, mission and vision statements and to develop and implement strategies to carry out the ministries God has for us through the people He has given to us.

But we hunger for the grace of God to enable us, both in the establishing of our purposes, the articulation of our mission and vision statements and the development and implementation of our mission strategies. We will move forward, not in the strength of our flesh and human ability, but in the power of God's grace by His Word and Spirit. In other words, we long for it to be said of the Chapel that *the work we have accomplished has been wrought by the grace God has given.*

Conclusion

These are some of the elements it takes to build a truly Biblical church. It is not all it takes, but may God continue to build His church here at the Chapel in our:

Expectation of Suffering (v.19-20)

Growth by Evangelism (v.21)

Development by Discipleship (v.22)

Establishment of Elder Governance (v.23)

Empowerment by Grace (v.24-26)

Preaching to Pagans

Acts 17:22-34

Introduction

A Letter from Athens

The following imaginary letter will be used to set the stage for Paul's sermon and its instruction to us and impact on us

From Athens, Philosophus to Flavel, my honored teacher and respected friend. Greetings and hopes for the best for you in these years of reflection and remembrance. How much I continue to value the instruction you gave me and yearn for your insight.

This has turned to be a day I will not long forget. My service among those seated on the Court of Philosophy at the Areopagus here in Athens is often dull beyond minding. The people here seem to rise to feed on the most foolish of fancies like fish to bait. Did you know, when sending me here, that this is a place where the latest philosophical fads, regardless of how silly and illogical they may be, are seriously debated and often accepted as real ways of understanding our world and life? If you did, then I retract my gratitude for your recommending me to this seat: sometimes it is honorable and sometimes I can barely contain my spittle.

We have here a large contingent of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. They tend to control the agenda, usually to cast other, new ideas in the worst light. They did this today. They brought before us a Jewish man named Paul[us]. From what I could gather, he is known around us for his going about teaching a new system that our esteemed colleagues thought was just an attempt to bring together scraps of all different sorts of philosophies and religions. He had been discoursing in the Jewish synagogues here in Athens as well as in the market place. He had gathered up quite a reputation as he seems almost fearless in openly declaring his philosophy and debating with those opposed to him.

Well, he was brought to the Areopagus and asked to declare in a full statement what his philosophy was. Some were saying that he was teaching some new deities. Well, you never saw a more unlikely philosopher. He did not have all the outward bearing and cultured manner that accompanies those who think deeply about life. And he was the most beat-up looking man I think I have seen in quite a while.

Yet Flavel, when he opened his mouth to speak, his words were simple, yet eloquent. There was no mistaking what he said (though some of what he said was quite shocking to us, though not unusual for a Jew: you know, particularly their claim that there is only one deity-and of course that is their deity.) I found myself wanting to know more about what he said. Though most of my colleagues have scoffed at this man's philosophy, I hope to talk with him later.

Greet those of your household. I hope to come to you soon and tell you what further has transpired. Farewell.

Thinking about Apologetics

Luke records for us what is probably a summary of a larger speech. In doing so, he captures the essence of Paul's sermon. So Paul has the opportunity to preach to pagans. He is in the highest place for philosophical debate. He can from here, develop and demonstrate an apologetic that will be Biblically honest, intellectually satisfying and evangelistically powerful. He can make a compelling case for the existence of God using the commonly accepted norms of logic and reason. He can find the cultural interface where what he has to say will make the most sense.

Now I wonder if Paul would do then what we often hear done now? "Try Jesus: if you don't like Him I'm sure the devil will take you back." "Men of Athens, Jesus is here to heal all your inner hurts and to affirm your self worth and to make you into all that you can be." "I perceive that you are very religious, persevere in those aspects of your worship that are nearest to the character of God and you will be accepted by God for Jesus' sake." "Men of Athens, there are 4 simple spiritual laws that everyone can understand..." "Since your poets and philosophers have articulated crumbs of truth, we can reason from those crumbs back to the whole piece of bread." "Men of Athens, let me show you how the Bible must be true so that you can reasonably and intelligently believe it." "Men of Athens, just have faith. Make a decision for this Jesus who died on the cross to save everybody. Choose God."

Culture and Connections

But, how does he begin?

- He begins with a comment on their obvious religiosity. This is not meant to be derogatory (unless it is being said with a sort of delicious irony, something not entirely foreign to Paul). Athens was full of temples and idols. All of this idolatry was not identified with simple-minded paganism as we do, but with sophisticated systems of thought that attempted to deal with perplexities and problems of the world.
- He makes a connection through their own self-confessed ignorance. Among all their gods and idols and altars, he has observed an altar "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD". Usually these inscriptions were placed on very old altars whose original inscription was lost due to the wear of time and weather. The connection is simply this, "You have lost the old knowledge of this deity through time. Yet, you in some vague way know that there was Someone to be worship and revered. So I am now here to declare to you this One."

And then what is quite startling is that he simply talks about the God who is there.

The God Who is There

(v.24-28)

There is no proof of the existence of God offered here. There is simple proclamation of the nature and work of God in creation. Paul is not teaching a systematic theology either. What he says here is a loose paraphrase of Isaiah 42:5, "Thus says God the Lord, Who created the heavens and stretched them out, Who spread out the earth and its offspring, Who gives breath to the people on it, And spirit to those who walk in it..." (NASB) So, though he does not say he is quoting from the Scriptures, he is actually using the Scriptures and following the line of Scriptural argument.

Paul's declaration of the God who is there answers three important questions. What is the nature and character of this God? What does this God do, particularly in relation to the universe and human history? What does this mean for us?

In His Nature

(v.24-25)

Now look carefully at verses 24-25. If you take out all the modifying phrases and clauses, there is a sentence here that makes two basic assertions or statements.

- God does not dwell in man-made temples.
- God is not served because He is needy but because of who He is.

These two assertions are at the heart of Paul's declaration of the character of God over against what was commonly believed. *GOD IS NOT CONFINED TO HUMAN SPACE NOR IS HE COMPLETED BY HUMAN SERVICE.* These two statements are wrapped in the modifiers that accompany them and describe the God Paul is declaring.

Source of All

The God whom Paul proclaims *made the cosmos*, the universe. He created all things. He brought it into existence. This is foundational. We must begin with the fact that this is God's world. He is the source of its existence, its designer and author and origin.

Why is this essential? If God did not make everything that is, then nothing is accountable to Him. "Ok, so God made the physical world of matter and energy, but humans evolved or developed from prior existing matter. They are the natural development of internal design." So, humans are exempt from accountability to God. The Christian answer resides in the doctrine of Creation. God made all things, including humans, for his own glory. This is not just "what we believe", this is the fact of the matter. So we establish that this is God's world with all that implies.

One of the implications is that God is *independent of His world*. He does not live in it, meaning His existence is not bounded by His creation. He does not need His creation meaning that He is complete and full and satisfied in Himself. God's essence does not require the craft of man in a Tent or a Temple, either of the kind whose stately pillars ringed the horizon of Athens or whose majestic beauty graced the pages of the Old Testament.

If God is the source of all then we are accountable to Him.

Sovereign over All

He is the Lord of heaven and earth. This would be heard in two senses that can be distinguished but not disconnected. It is like the two wings of a plane: we can see the left and right one but planes don't fly very well if they are disconnected. So it is with God being Lord of heaven and earth.

- It means that *HE IS DEITY*. What Paul is asserting here is not just that God is one among many gods. He is not just a magnificent being like some massive, hyper-intelligent alien being. This God is absolute and ultimate. His Deity lies behind and over all existence. The pantheon of mythological gods and idols actually placed them in competition with one another. But the God of Paul is ultimate, final and absolute Deity.
- It means that *HE IS SOVEREIGN*. He is the Lord Almighty Sovereign over and above all as GOD. He alone has the Sovereign rights to be acknowledged, feared, loved and obeyed as the King over all the Cosmos. The gods of the pagan world might be feared, appeased, served and possibly even worshipped. But they were also flighty, craven, irresponsible and often deserving of the scorn they received. Not so the God of Paul's preaching. He is a Sovereign Majesty who is worthy of not only fear and worship and obedience, but calls forth from us worship, love and passionate devotion.

If God is sovereign over all then we must bow to Him.

Sustainer of All

This God gives life and breath and all things to all. Paul is careful to emphasize that it is *God Himself*. In no sense is man's life self-sustaining. That we are alive and our hearts beat and our lungs breathe and that we live on a world whose order and climate makes human life possible is of God. The possibility of self-sustaining life has always been a sinful dream and God-defying myth.

Paul's declaration rests clearly on Daniel 5:23 which reads, But you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives

and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear or understand. But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways, you have not glorified. (NASB)

See how Paul reverses things. God is not served as though, in a way or because He is in some way needy or incomplete. He is served because we are utterly and totally needy and dependent and incomplete without Him. Get this right, loved ones. God does not need us. Any presentation of the gospel that implies that God needs man is utterly wrong as it misrepresents the God who is there and misstates the true, utter dependent nature of man. What is so interesting here is that it is not just our sinfulness that is in view. In fact, sinfulness is not in view here. It is our creatureliness that makes us dependent on this majestic, sovereign creator God.

If God is the sustainer of all then we are utterly dependent on Him.

In His Works

(v.26-28)

The God who is there is not only transcendent; that is, He is independent, sovereign and sustaining of all but He is also immanent. He is not aloof from human history and its events. Nor is He under the control of human events and choices. He is not merely reacting to what happens, but has determined according to His own purposes what will transpire while being actively engaged in history.

Paul is continuing to follow the line of Biblical thought in Malachi 2:10 and Deuteronomy 32:8. "Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers?" (Malachi 2:10) "When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of man, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel. For the Lord's portion is His people; Jacob is the allotment of His inheritance. (Deuteronomy 32:8-9) NASB.

Providence in History

Paul declares two important things about God's working in human history.

- There is only one race among humans. God has made from one all the people groups. Look at it carefully. "One man" is the word "one" in the Greek. The word "nations" is *ethnos* referring in its singular to a people group. What a blow to Greek pride and to all forms of racism today. Christians need to stand up and say that there is no such thing as the three racial groups (or how ever many we have today). Yes, there are ethnic groups; this is a Biblical way to think of it. But to think of ourselves as innately superior or

inferior to others because of a set of physical features is exactly what Paul is aiming this truth at. We must assert that it is a simple fact that twice in human history, all of mankind basically was in one man: Adam at Creation and Noah at the Flood.

- God has determined the rise and fall of ethnic and national groups and has determined where they will live and what they will rule over. All the nations' time in history and place on the earth are of God's determination. We are not self-determining. The Greeks and Romans had their time in the sun under God's sovereign providence. America has risen and will fall according to God's decree.

Purpose in History

The God who is determining and controlling human history is doing so along the axis of His purpose. God is working according to what He has determined will bring Him glory in the end. There is a high and holy and glorious purpose working through the determination of the time and place in history of all the nations and people groups.

That purpose in providence is that the nations and the people groups may seek and find God. Now their groping for God is in the darkness of their sin and sinfulness. Their ignorance blinds; not just the not knowing, but the willful, chosen ignorance against real light and truth. They are not groping for God in a dark room, but in a universe brightly lit with the revelation of God. However, they are groping about with blind eyes firmly shut denying the reality Who and what is there.

Presence behind History

This groping for God in their time and place in history is for the one who is near to them. They are not having to reach across the massive sea of space and stars to reach and find God. No, God is the ultimate environment of all that is. All the cosmos moves in being of God like a bubble on the surface of the ocean. Denying this does not make it any the less so.

So, Paul illustrates this groping with quotes from two Greek poets, Epimendis (600 BC) and Aratus (315-240 BC). I suggest to you here that Paul is not proving his point with these quotes as though the truth from the Scriptures were insufficient. Rather, they are illustrative of the fact that God is near and His revelation is clear and yet when it is seen it is twisted and perverted so that the true God is not worshipped but the false god, Zeus, to whom these quotes actually refer. To the pagan audience here is evidence of the nearness of God. To the Christian reader, here is Romans 1 in plain sight.

This is the God who is there. He is simply declared. What of Him that is declared confronts the pagan with his myths and idols.

The Confrontation by this God

(v.29-31)

That God is there, that He is like this and that He is working means that we must respond. There is no neutral or safe ground from which we may, without consequence, view God. If all these things are so then God challenges us.

In How You Must Think of Him

(v.29)

This is stated in the negative. We must not think of God in our image. All through the Scriptures there is a powerful testimony of the tendency of man who is created in the image of God to try to make a god in the image of man. Thus we can form out of clay and wood and precious metals outward idols shaped by the mold of heart imaginations. Or from the idols in our hearts we can imagine a god very different from the God of the Bible and worship this idea as though it were true.

Paul here, even in the outward making of images, identifies the root of it in vain imagination and idol filled hearts. Beloved, understand this. You may have no physical idol you worship – our culture does not lend itself to that. But many, many Christians have remade God in their own image to serve their own felt needs. And doing so they are not thinking of the God of the Bible at all.

In What He Demands of You

(v.30)

This is not a divine suggestion. It is not merely a human option. From Him who is the source of all, the sovereign over all and the sustainer of all comes the imperial command, *repent*.

- God has overlooked your willful ignorance in the past. It is His sovereign mercy and amazing patience that He does so. This should not cause us to be presumptuous, to assume that He will continue in the face of our rebellion and pride.
- God is demanding you repentance in the present. It is His sovereign right and absolute power to do so now. We must believe and bow. There must be a very real sense of turning from self and sin to God, our Savior and Sovereign.

So while we plead with men and women to be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5) we also proclaim to men and women the command of God to repent. Thus our evangelism has both a note of authority and a note of deep concern and humility.

In Whom He Has Appointed Judge over You

(v.31)

Why should you repent? Just because there is a great and almighty God whose command has gone forth? No, because there will be a day when you will stand before God to give an account. Further, He has

appointed His crucified and risen Son as the righteous judge on that day.

Interesting isn't it? The facts of the gospel, the death and resurrection of Jesus, come into Paul's declaration at the point of judgment. In other words, you will stand, not only before the Source of all, the Sovereign over all, the Sustainer of all but you will stand before the One whose glory you have offend, whose greatness you have denied, whose Word you have rejected and whose authority you have rebelled against. So this judgment will be both principled and personal.

The Common Responses to this God (v.32-34)

So how do people respond to this? In fact, at least as it is recorded in the text, there is no particular decision called for. Why? Because the way people respond to the Word preached is itself a decision. There is no neutral ground. Even decisions to wait till later are decisions to continue in rejection and rebellion.

Those Who Scoff (v.32)

So there are those who scoff. Now they scoff at the idea of the resurrection of the dead. They hear the good news of the God who is there whose nature and works confront their cherished notions and world-view myths. Yet the real rub comes when we say that there is only one through whom you may be saved. This one died and is now alive and because His work has been authenticated by the resurrection, you will stand one day to be judged by Him.

There are those who will turn away from the truth and reject the Word. We know from the rest of the Bible that is not because they are not intellectually persuaded or emotionally challenged, but because they are spiritually dead. Unless the preaching of the gospel on our side is accompanied by the regenerating work of the Spirit and the imparting of faith and repentance, men and women will turn away in some form of real rejection.

Those Who Inquire (v.32)

There will be some who will want to hear more later. They will be inquirers who will give the gospel

Those Who Believe (v.33-34)

I love the words of verse 34. Some joined him and believed. They leave the Aeropagus and the scoffing philosophers and identify themselves with Paul and believed the message. What we have here is true repentance. Luke even records the name of two of them, possibly be-

cause they were known among the disciples and mentions that others believed as well.

This is the longing of our hearts. That men and women would hear the good news, be regenerated by God and receive the gifts of faith and repentance. And so I ask, will you?

Conclusion

Now it is not our task in evangelism or in preaching to pagans to simply parrot Paul's sermon. But he does establish categories and priorities and a flow of thought that we must emulate as the very wisdom of God.

- *BEGIN WITH CREATION.* Unless you are confident that the people you are preaching too have a good knowledge of the Bible, you must begin at creation. So here is the simple people, with religious people you may begin with Christ; in all other cases, begin at creation.
- *SIMPLY DECLARE THE TRUTH.* I know that there are a thousand questions that can come up. There is a place for discussion and reasoned debate with honest questions. But in the end, we believe because the Bible says this is so, and so must they. Believing the Bible as God's Word is the faith that God gives.
- *EMPHASIZE THE TRANSCENDENCE AND SOVEREIGN AUTHORITY OF GOD* (v.24-26). This is instructive. What we have way too much of in modern evangelism is the presentation of a god who is here for us. I contend that the constant emphasis in the gospel that God has made a way through His salvation that we might come and bow and give ourselves utterly to Him.
- *CHALLENGE THE BASIC IDEAS AND VALUES OF SINNERS* (v.29). A presentation of the gospel often must say, "we must not think that..." and fill in the blank. It must go after and destroy the safety of the lies and self-serving deceptions in which people take refuge.
- *BRING CHRIST TO YOUR HEARERS SO YOUR HEARERS CAN COME TO CHRIST* (v.31). The focus of the redemptive story is on Christ, particularly his death and resurrection. His death relates to our sin and His resurrection to our righteousness. Tell the facts of the gospel.
- *ANNOUNCE THE COMMAND OF GOD TO REPENT* (v.30). It is fascinating that Paul comes to the point where, not in his own voice, but in God's (if you will) he announces, "God has commanded all men everywhere to repent." If you go through the gospel without coming to the point of exhorting your hearers to repent, to turn about, have sorrow over sin and humility before God and turning from trusting sinful self to faith in a Sovereign Savior, then you have not finished the work of evangelism. The sharp

edge of the gospel must pierce the mind, sever the affections and cut the will.

- *REST IN THE SOVEREIGN WORK OF GOD* (v.32-34). Some will scoff and some will believe. Trust God to do His work in the hearts of men and women. What a great thing it is to find ourselves faithful and resting in Him.