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Scratching the Itch: Paul's Athenian Speech Shaping Mission Today

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PAUL'S SPEECH, RECORDED in Acts 17:16-34, and the events surrounding it, have been described as 'the most outstanding example of intercultural evangelistic witness in the New Testament'.¹ Scholars regard Paul as a masterful mission practitioner and this passage portrays him at his best, communicating the gospel with creativity and skill. Through reflecting on this text, we are 'invited to discover paradigms that might inform, guide, and suggest parameters for the ongoing task of enabling the gospel to come to life in new settings'.²

**I Settings for mission:
'innovation and adventure'**³

Paul may have never intended, nor included in his missionary strategy, to preach in Athens as he was simply waiting there for Timothy and Silas (v.16).⁴ Yet Paul did not view this waiting period as 'down time' and he took every available opportunity to share the gospel. This is a challenge for western Christians in our segmented and compartmentalized lives. Mission should not end when we come home from an ESL lesson, unpack from summer mission trip or fly home for sabbatical.

While Paul spent time teaching in the synagogue, his most significant ministry occurred in the marketplace

1 Dean Flemming, *Contextualisation in the New Testament: Patterns for theology and mission* (England: Apollos, 2005), 72.

2 Dean Flemming, 'Contextualising the Gospel in Athens: Paul's Areopagus address as a paradigm for missionary communication', *Missiology* 30 No. 2 April 2002, 199-214.

3 Anthony B. Robinson and Robert W. Wall, *Called to be Church: The books of Acts for a new day* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006), 223.

4 Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: realities, strategies and methods* (Illinois: Intervarsity, 2008), 99.

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and at the city council, the Areopagus. Paul was 'out there on their turf',⁵ engaging with those on the margins or outside the synagogue. He displayed skill and diversity by his interactions with various groups including religious people, onlookers and bystanders and sophisticated, elite philosophers.

Paul's model invites Christians to resist huddling together only to maintain the spiritual health and happiness of 'insiders' and instead seek to minister among non-Christians in commercial, scholarly and public environments. In addition to traditional mission settings, we require people who can 'gossip the gospel'⁶ in informal settings, debate with intellectuals and express truth creatively among artists. This challenge is confronting for those who make claims of concern for the wider world yet resist authentic engagement.⁷

II The importance of observation:

*'it all began with his eyes'*⁸

Paul begins his speech by describing his observations as he walked through the city (v.23). 'He did not just "notice" the idols. He looked and looked, and thought and thought, until the fires of holy indignation were kindled within him'.⁹ Paul's skill was seen in making

considered observations and then reflecting on the implications for Athenian spirituality.¹⁰ The order of Paul's actions is important: 'He saw, he felt, he spoke.'¹¹

Paul's model is critical for mission today. People do not appreciate the arrogance of missionaries who keenly rush in with words, sermons and doctrine, yet fail to spend considerable time watching, listening and learning. We need to assume the posture of astute and humble students of culture, listening sensitively, approaching carefully and taking time. 'We must study [others'] religion—preferably by reading their own writers, by observing their practices, and by talking to their adherents.'¹²

Christians in all settings would benefit from training on how to watch effectively, listen deeply, question thoroughly and notice cultural cues. Churches also need to give the cross-cultural workers they support the freedom to incorporate years of cultural learning without feeling the pressure of fast 'results'.

III Responding from within:

*'our hearts should ache and our eyes blur at what we see around us'*¹³

As Paul observed the city, he was

5 Robinson, *Called to be Church*, 222.

6 John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (England: Intervarsity, 1990), 281.

7 Robinson, *Called to be Church*, 222.

8 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 291.

9 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 291.

10 Robinson, *Called to be Church*, 216.

11 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 291.

12 Ajith Fernando, 'Acts': *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 479.

13 R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The church afire* (Illinois: Crossway, 1996), 230-231.

deeply distressed to see the city full of idols (v16). 'Deeply' translates the Greek phrase that means 'his spirit within him' and refers to his inner spiritual life.¹⁴ There is conjecture about whether Paul's emotion was that of anger, fury, compassion, irritation or exasperation. The main point here is that Paul felt. He was moved in his being and stirred by the Spirit within him.

Paul did not respond with irrational anger or temper and he did not disclose his emotion to the philosophers.¹⁵ Courtesy was displayed for the sake of sensitive communication.

Like Paul, we must be 'alert to God's guidance and ready to adapt quickly to...unexpected situations'.¹⁶ Self-awareness and discernment are critical for listening not only to the culture around, but also to the Spirit within. Many of us struggle to listen to God within us, confused and distracted by the cacophony of noise in our hyper-stimulated, technology-soaked environment. A major reason why the church slumbers peacefully on and its people are deaf to Christ's commission and tongue-tied in testimony is that we do not feel as Paul felt.¹⁷ The Spirit has not stopped stirring, however we have not been still, alert or in-tune enough to take notice.

IV A jealous God: 'Yahweh, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God' (Ex. 34:14)

Paul's distress is birthed from the conflict that arises with Jewish beliefs and Old Testament teaching about idols and images detracting attention from the one true God. The concern Paul felt 'aroused within him deep stirrings of jealousy for the name of God',¹⁸ his conviction for Jewish monotheism a strong motivator for mission.

Jealousy for the name of God no longer carries such motivational weight for mission. It is instead a deterrent. In our western, post-modern context where any claim to exclusive truth is shunned, Christians 'deny finality and uniqueness of Jesus Christ and [thus] reject the very concept of evangelizing'.¹⁹ Reclaiming zeal and jealousy for the name of Jesus as an incentive is an increasingly challenging task.

V Strategic communication: 'a deliberative speech'²⁰

Scholars have praised Paul's address to the Athenians as strategically 'remarkable',²¹ providing this rationale:

- i. Paul chose Stoic principles and quoted Greek writers as a point of

14 Robinson, *Called to be Church*, 212.

15 Stanley H., Kreslet, *Picturing Christian Witness: New Testament images of disciples in mission* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006), 137.

16 Kreslet, *Picturing Christian Witness*, 141.

17 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 290.

18 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 279.

19 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 279.

20 Lynn Allan Losie, 'Paul's Speech on the Areopagus: A Model for Cross-cultural Evangelism', in Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Derig (eds) *Mission in Acts: Ancient narratives in contemporary context* (New York: Orbis, 2004), 221-234, 226.

21 Howard Clark Kee, *The Theology of Acts* (London: SCM, 1990), 64-65.

- entry and to 'guarantee attention and a sympathetic hearing'.²² He addresses the philosophical understanding of Stoics and Epicureans.
- ii. He specifically attends to the listeners' claims by reassuring them that he was not introducing new deities.²³
 - iii. He cleverly used the claims against him to talk about the character of God. 'At the end of Paul's speech...the members of the council must have suddenly realized that they were no longer investigating Paul and his teaching...rather they are under investigation themselves.'²⁴
 - iv. His speech followed the established format with which the hearers would be familiar. He presented a 'deliberative speech, according to the conventional genres of the Greco-Roman rhetoric'.²⁵ This included the introduction (vv.22b-23a), thesis (v.23b), narrative of facts on which the argument is built (vv.24-29), argument (vv.30-31) and finally, conclusion (vv.32-34)
 - v. The content was equally acceptable as a common topic for this audience. His terms, convictions, arguments, formulations and cultural language were understood and acknowledged as valid.

In this address 'Paul is at his rhetorical best, drawing upon whatever per-

suasive tools are in his kit in order to engage the Athenian worldview and culture'.²⁶ Therefore, it is not a summary of Paul's sermons, but a speech for a specific context.²⁷

The intentionality of the address raises important lessons for mission today. There is no 'one size fits all' approach to sharing the gospel in different cultures. The message that is proclaimed, through word and deed, must be accessible and intelligible to the hearers. It needs to 'scratch where they itch' by responding to felt needs, addressing questions that are asked and dealing with relevant issues.

VI A comprehensive message: *grounded in theology*

It is clear from the content of the speech that Paul addresses the audience 'at the level of their basic worldview assumptions, creating a necessary context and foundation for proclaiming the risen Christ'.²⁸ He does not assume familiarity with the Old Testament and bases his arguments on general revelation and extra-scriptural evidence rather than Christological assertions.²⁹ Paul proclaims God as creator, sustainer, ruler, father and judge, thus grounding his Christology in theology.³⁰ This perspective is comprehensive, holistic and lays solid groundwork.

Perhaps contemporary people are

²² Kee, *Good News to the Ends of the Earth*, 65.

²³ Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 103.

²⁴ Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 168.

²⁵ Losie, *Mission in Acts*, 226.

²⁶ Flemming, *Contextualisation*, 75.

²⁷ Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 103.

²⁸ Flemming, *Contextualisation*, 77.

²⁹ Kreslet, *Picturing Christian Witness*, 134.

³⁰ Flemming, *Contextualisation*, 77.

uninterested in the gospel because they perceive it to be trivial, narrow and disconnected from their lives.³¹ They seek a gospel that integrates their worldview and life experiences. As Stott points out, 'We cannot preach the gospel of Jesus without the doctrine of God, or the cross without creation, or salvation without judgment. Today's church needs a bigger gospel, the full gospel of Scripture.'³²

VII Embracing culture: 'takes the audience seriously'³³

The point of greatest discussion about this text is the way Paul began by affirming his audience and inducing their positive impression. He respectfully begins: 'Men of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious.' (v.22). They are addressed 'as religious people in a religious idiom about religious matters in anticipation of a religious response.'³⁴ This affirmation created an environment conducive to further dialogue.

Critiquing the lack of esteem displayed by some missionaries in Africa, Mbuvi writes: 'Once the other is dubbed a "savage", "heathen," "primitive," "of the devil," "godless," etc., then there is no space for dialogue.'³⁵ Paul did not overtly condemn or dis-

miss the audience, but 'wilfully engages the religious world and convictions of the other...and engages the deeper aspect of belief that was already in place'.³⁶ He meets them where they are.

The altar to the unknown God (v23) is used as a 'rhetorical bridge'³⁷ to the main subject of his address. He recognizes the reality of the Athenians' spiritual experience and uses the altar to highlight the potential of a more genuine relationship with God. Motivated by fear of offending an anonymous deity, the altar was most likely a safety precaution.

Legend tells that during a plague, Epimenides of Crete counselled the Athenians to send a flock of sheep on the Areopagus and erect altars to unnamed gods where the sheep stopped.³⁸ It is not known whether Paul knew of this story, but if he did, modern missiologists would recognize this as a redemptive analogy—a story embedded within a culture and used to demonstrate biblical truth.

Paul's approach is an example of contextualization: 'the dynamic and comprehensive process by which the gospel is incarnated within a concrete historical or cultural situation'.³⁹ It is the responsibility and privilege of Christians to exegete the context, discern what is appropriate, discover points of connection, take the spirituality of the people seriously and communicate with the least-possible number of barriers to understanding. A con-

31 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 290.

32 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 290.

33 Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 183.

34 Robinson, *Called to be Church*, 216.

35 Mbuvi, Andrew M., 'Missionary acts, things fall apart: Modelling mission in Acts 17:15-34 and a concern for dialogue in Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart*', *Ex auditu* 23 (2007), 141.

36 Mbuvi, *Ex auditu*, 153.

37 Kreslet, *Picturing Christian Witness*, 133.

38 Flemming, *Contextualisation*, 76.

39 Flemming, *Contextualisation*, 19.

textual approach is not only important for sharing the gospel, but also for how the gospel is 'worked out'. It is the Christian's role to step back, pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance and empower the recipients to 'live out the gospel in obedience to Christ within their own cultures and circumstances'.⁴⁰ It is widely acknowledged that a contextual approach to mission is a respectful, honest and creative method of mission.

VIII Challenging culture: *'he walked on very thin ice'*⁴¹

Due to the fact that the gospel does not exist in one particular language group or cultural system,⁴² it will never exist neatly in any group without provoking change and transformation. Therefore as Flemming points out, 'The gospel, in some ways, is countercultural to every culture'.⁴³ While Paul acknowledges the Athenians' search for God, he implies that their search has been unsuccessful⁴⁴ or incomplete (v.23).

Someone motivated by a Spirit-led conviction about a jealous God could not say 'you have gods, I have a God...we're all believing different forms of the same thing'.⁴⁵ Instead, Paul 'undermines the deep logic of the

city's idolatry'⁴⁶ (v.29) by arguing that idols cannot produce offspring. He reveals the inconsistency of their idol worship by comparison with the character of God's relationship. Since Paul is forthright about the incongruence, we witness the reality that 'no smooth path is laid out over which thoroughly pagan religious sensibilities and the church's witness to Christ could travel side by side without serious tension'.⁴⁷

It is no surprise that the monotheistic message was not entirely palatable to the listeners' ears. In Athens, the temples made the city famous, sacrifices ensured goodwill of gods and participation in the cults led to higher social status.⁴⁸ Thus, some sneered and others were hesitant and cautious. Believing the resurrection of the dead and acknowledging the divine kingship of Jesus 'inevitably led to direct conflict of the early church with the pluralism and relativism of the Greco-Roman world'.⁴⁹

During the process of Kingdom transformation, the gospel offends, challenges and confronts. Despite the inevitable disruption it will cause, we must avoid 'watering down' the gospel to make it more palatable.⁵⁰ The task of mission in every culture is to carefully discern both the essential elements of the gospel that cannot be shaken, as

40 Flemming, *Contextualisation*, 19.

41 Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 180.

42 Gaventa, Beverly Roberts, 'You will be my witnesses: aspects of mission in the Acts of the Apostles', *Missiology* 10: (4 Oct. 1982), 413-425.

43 Flemming, *Contextualisation*, 83.

44 Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 339.

45 Robinson, *Called to be Church*, 222.

46 Robinson, *Called to be Church*, 218.

47 Kreslet, *Picturing Christian Witness*, 137.

48 Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 180.

49 David Peterson, 'The Worship of the New Community' in I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (eds) *Witness to the Gospel: the theology of Acts*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 384.

50 Flemming, *Contextualisation*, 81.

well as the unnecessary elements that can be negotiated or modified.

A common attitude hindering this process is fear of affirming aspects of another's faith and extreme caution not to 'go too far'. The terror of syncretism paralyzes people into not going far enough. Instead, people avoid interacting in 'spheres that engage the non-Christian mind'.⁵¹ For many, contextual mission is confronting and risky. Paul displayed 'an uncommon degree of courage to speak as he spoke',⁵² which encourages us to have courage, commitment and an unwavering reliance on the Holy Spirit to be our guide.

IX Culture informing theology

Paul's speech wonderfully portrays the dance between gospel and culture, and the care that needs to be taken in communicating effectively. It addresses the issue of how Christians use traditions of other cultures to provide insights for theology. For many, the issue is not 'how *do* they' but 'how *could* they!' Some people flatly refuse to engage in non-Christian cultures 'for fear of contamination'.⁵³ At the other extreme of the spectrum are those who ignore all meaningful distinctions between Christian and non-Christian culture. A healthy response is to acknowledge the tension and thoughtfully engage in the process with the assumption that much can be revealed about the character of God.

Underlying this issue is the assumption that God is present and revealing God's-self in all cultures. Bidden or not bidden, God is present. For Paul, Athens was a place where God already existed and was active. 'Paul made the bold claim to enlighten their ignorance...insisting thereby that special revelation must control and correct whatever general revelation seems to disclose'.⁵⁴ What does it mean for us to truly believe that there are no God-forsaken places on earth? Paul's precedent of quoting pagan poets, referring to pagan altars and encouraging the spiritual quest of the Athenians 'gives us warrant to do the same and indicates glimmerings of truth' found in non-Christian sources⁵⁵.

X Cutting ties or creating links

Unfortunately much unlearning needs to take place, particularly in colonized communities where mission efforts have included communicating the gospel plus a great deal of cultural baggage associated with western Christianity. Losie provides an example:

Asian theologians need to be liberated from overly Westernized forms of theology, especially when their own cultural traditions are in many ways more in tune with the ancient values of biblical cultures and thus can provide insights for the development of theology.⁵⁶

There is great hope of exploration

51 Fernando, *Acts*, 480.

52 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 284.

53 Kreslet, *Picturing Christian Witness*, 138.

54 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 285.

55 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 286.

56 Losie, *Mission in Acts*, 233.

as Christians rediscover traditions and practices that give life to their new-found faith. We all have much to learn.

This question of what a new believer 'does' with their past religious tradition poses an often stressful predicament. How does one discern what elements of their previous religion to discard and what aspects to maintain? This is particularly pertinent in cultures where religion is tightly meshed with cultural identity; thus, for example, it is said 'to be Thai is to be Buddhist' and 'to be Bengali is to be Muslim'. Many new believers will still identify themselves culturally as Buddhist or Muslim while being followers of Jesus. It is common that many would deny 'Christian' identity due to the negative and inaccurate cultural baggage the term represents.

A key question is: does conversion require denying all aspects of one religion and adopting all facets of another? Or does it refer to the process of adding and subtracting elements of knowledge and understanding as one discovers new insights? Many new believers do not perceive that they have 'transferred their worship from one god to another, but as having begun now to worship in truth the God they were previously trying to worship in ignorance, error or distortion'.⁵⁷

Paul is very clear in describing God as not abiding in temples made by human hands and we know he adheres to monotheism. What, therefore, is Paul asking of new believers? What aspects of Greek culture and thought

can they 'keep' and of what elements must they repent? How did the Holy Spirit lead Dionysius, Damaris and the other converts to make these decisions?

Insight is gained from Losie, who describes how Acts 17 provides comfort and insight to the Korean theology students in her classes.

They are a part of a culture that values antiquity, and they are relieved to find in this speech a precedent for honoring the traditions of their ancestors while at the same time being faithful in the proclamation of the gospel.⁵⁸

As followers of Jesus who read and reflect on Acts 17 for our times, we are invited to join in the dance between gospel and culture as we 'do' mission. Luke's contribution of this story in Acts beckons the church to 'engage the rest of humanity with the claims of the gospel'.⁵⁹ It also provides a model for mission that Christians have been imitating, wrestling with and dialoguing about for centuries. Acts 17 encourages Christians to trust the work of the Spirit in un-believing cultures, to put aside our arrogant claims to possess all the answers, and to enjoy the journey as we discover new insights from other cultures. 'Taking our lead from Paul, we must sensitively and critically engage a pluralistic world, while offering that world an alternative vision of reality'.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 285.

⁵⁸ Losie, *Mission in Acts*, 233.

⁵⁹ Kreslet, *Picturing Christian Witness*, 140.

⁶⁰ Flemming, *Contextualisation*, 83.