

13. Paul in Athens

17:16–34

There is something enthralling about Paul in Athens, the great Christian apostle amid the glories of ancient Greece. Of course he had known about Athens since his boyhood. Everybody knew about Athens. Athens had been the foremost Greek city-state since the fifth century BC. Even after its incorporation into the Roman Empire, it retained a proud intellectual independence and also became a free city. It boasted of its rich philosophical tradition inherited from Socrates, [Plato](#) and [Aristotle](#), of its literature and art, and of its notable achievements in the cause of human liberty. Even if in Paul's day it 'lived on its great past',¹ and was a comparatively small town by modern criteria, it still had an unrivalled reputation as the empire's intellectual metropolis.

Now for the first time Paul visited the Athens of which he had heard so much, arriving by sea from the north. His friends, who had given him a safe escort from Berea, had gone. He had asked them to send Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible (17:15). He was hoping to be able to return to Macedonia, for it was to Macedonia that he had been called (16:10). Meanwhile, as he waited for their arrival, he found himself alone in the cultural capital of the world. What was his reaction? What should be the reaction of a Christian who visits or lives in a city which is dominated by a non-Christian ideology or religion, a city which may be aesthetically magnificent and culturally sophisticated, but morally decadent and spiritually deceived or dead? There were four parts to Paul's reaction. Luke tells us what he saw, felt, did and said.

1. What Paul saw

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, that is, for Silas and Timothy, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols (16) or 'given over to idolatry' (JB). Of course he could have walked round Athens as a tourist, as we would probably have done, in order to see the sights of the town. He could have been determined, now that at last he had the opportunity, to 'do' Athens thoroughly and tick its spectacles one by one. For the buildings and monuments of Athens were unrivalled. The acropolis, the town's

¹Haenchen, p. 517.

ancient citadel, which was elevated enough to be seen from miles around, has been described as ‘one vast composition of architecture and sculpture dedicated to the national glory and to the worship of the gods’.² Even today, although now a partial ruin, the Parthenon has a unique grandeur. Or Paul could have lingered in the *agora*, with its many porticoes painted by famous artists, in order to listen to the debates of its contemporary statesmen and philosophers, for Athens was well known for its democracy. And Paul was no uncultured philistine. In our terms he was a graduate of the universities of Tarsus and Jerusalem, and God had endowed him with a massive intellect. So he might have been spellbound by the sheer splendour of the city’s architecture, history and wisdom.

Yet it was none of these things which struck him. First and foremost what he saw neither the beauty nor the brilliance of the city, but its idolatry [⚡]. The adjective Luke uses (*kateidōlos*) occurs nowhere else in the New Testament, and has not been found in any other Greek literature. Although most English versions render it ‘full of idols’, the idea conveyed seems to be that the city was ‘under’ them. We might say that it was ‘smothered with idols’ or ‘swamped’ by them [⚡]. Alternatively, since *kata* words often express luxurious growth, what Paul saw was ‘a veritable forest of idols’.³ As he was later to say, the Athenians were ‘very religious’ (22). Xenophon referred to Athens as ‘one great altar, one great sacrifice’.⁴ In consequence, ‘there were more gods in Athens than in all the rest of the country, and the Roman satirist hardly exaggerates when he says that it was easier to find a god there than a man [⚡]’.⁵ There were innumerable temples, shrines, statues and altars. In the Parthenon stood a huge gold and ivory statue of Athena, ‘whose gleaming spear-point was visible forty miles away’.⁶ Elsewhere there were images of Apollo, the city’s patron, of Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Bacchus, Neptune, Diana and Aesculapius. The whole Greek pantheon was there, all the gods of Olympus. And they were beautiful. They were made not only of stone and brass, but of gold, sil-

² Quoted by Conybeare and Howson, p. 275.

³ R. E. Wycherley; quoted by Marshall, *Acts*, p. 283.

⁴ Quoted by Alexander, II, p. 145.

⁵ Conybeare and Howson, p. 280.

⁶ Blaiklock, *Acts*, p. 137.

ver, ivory and marble, and they had been elegantly fashioned by the finest Greek sculptors. There is no need to suppose that Paul was blind to their beauty. But beauty did not impress him if it did not honour God the Father and the [Lord Jesus Christ](#). Instead, he was oppressed by the idolatrous use to which the God-given artistic creativity of the Athenians was being put. This is what Paul saw: a city submerged in its idols. ❖

2. What Paul felt

He was greatly distressed (16). The Greek verb *paroxynō*, from which ‘paroxysm’ comes, originally had medical associations and was used of a seizure or epileptic fit. It also meant to ‘stimulate’, especially to ‘irritate, provoke, rouse to anger’ (GT). Its only other occurrence in the New Testament is in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church, where he describes love as ‘not easily angered’.⁷ Did Paul then not practise in Athens what he preached to Corinth? Was he roused to sinful anger by the city’s idolatry? Is it right to say that he was ‘irritated’ (Moffatt), and even ‘exasperated’ (NEB, JBP)? No, I think not. To begin with, the verb is in the imperfect tense, which expresses not a sudden loss of temper but rather a continuous, settled reaction to what Paul saw. Besides, he was alone. Nobody witnessed his paroxysm. So this must have been the word which he himself used when later describing his feelings to Luke; evidently he was not ashamed of them.

The clue to interpreting the nature of Paul’s emotion is that *paroxynō* is the verb which is regularly used in the LXX of the Holy One of Israel, and in particular (such is the consistency of Scripture) of his reaction to idolatry. Thus, when the Israelites made the golden calf at Mount Sinai, when later they were guilty of gross idolatry and immorality in relation to the Baal of Peor, and when the Northern Kingdom made another calf to worship in Samaria, they ‘provoked’ the Lord God to anger. Indeed, he described Israel as ‘an obstinate people ... who continually provoke me to my very face’.⁸ So Paul was ‘provoked’ (RSV) by idolatry, and provoked to anger, grief and indignation, just as God is himself, and for the same reason, namely for the honour and glory of his name. Scripture sometimes calls this emotion ‘jealousy’. For example, it is written that Yahweh, ‘whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God’.⁹ Now jealousy is the resentment of rivals,

⁷ 1 Cor. 13:5.

⁸ Is. 65:2–3; see Dt. 9:7, 18, 22; Ps. 106:28–29; Ho. 8:5.

and whether it is good or evil depends on whether the rival has any business to be there. To be jealous of someone who threatens to outshine us in beauty, brains or sport is sinful, because we cannot claim a monopoly of talent in those areas. If, on the other hand, a third party enters a marriage, the jealousy of the injured person, who is being displaced, is righteous, because the intruder has no right to be there. It is the same with God, who says, 'I am the Lord, the is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols'.¹⁰ Our Creator and Redeemer has a right to our exclusive allegiance, and is 'jealous' if we transfer it to anyone or anything else. Moreover, the people of God, who love God's name, should share in his 'jealousy' for it. For example, Elijah at a time of national apostasy said, 'I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts',¹¹ so distressed was he that God's honour was being profaned. Similarly, Paul wrote to the backsliding Corinthians, 'I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy';¹² he longed for them to remain loyal to Jesus, to whom he had betrothed them.

So the pain or 'paroxysm' which Paul felt in Athens was due neither to bad temper, not to pity for the Athenians' ignorance, nor even to fear for their eternal salvation. It was due rather to his abhorrence of idolatry, which aroused within him deep stirrings of jealousy for the Name of God, as he saw human beings so depraved as to be giving to idols the honour and glory which were due to the one, living and true God alone. 'His whole soul was revolted at the sight of a city given over to idolatry' (JB).

Moreover this inward pain and horror, which moved Paul to share the good news with the idolaters of Athens, should similarly move us. Incentives are important in every sphere. Being rational human beings, we need to know not only what we should be doing, but why we should be doing it. And motivation for mission is specially important, not least in our day in which the comparative study of religions has led many to deny finality and uniqueness to Jesus Christ and to reject the very concept of evangelizing and converting people. How then, in the face of growing opposition to it, can Christians justify the continuance of world evangelization? The commonest answer is to point to the Great commission, and indeed obedience to it provides a strong stimulus.

⁹ Ex. 34:14.

¹⁰ Is. 42:8.

¹¹ 1 Ki. 19:10 (RSV).

¹² 2 Cor. 11:2ff.

Compassion is higher than obedience, however, namely love for people who do not know Jesus Christ, and who on that account are alienated, disorientated, and indeed lost. But the highest incentive of all is zeal or jealousy for the glory of Jesus Christ. God has promoted him to the supreme place of honour, in order that every knee and tongue should acknowledge his lordship. Whenever he is denied his rightful place in people's lives, therefore, we should feel inwardly wounded, and jealous for his name. As Henry Martyn expressed it in Moslem Persia at the beginning of the last century, 'I could not endure existence if Jesus was not glorified; it would be hell to me, if he were to be always ... dishonoured.'¹³

3. What Paul did

So (*men oun*; 'therefore', **AV**) he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there (17). A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him (18a). Paul's reaction to the city's idolatry was not negative only (horror and dismay) but also positive and constructive (witness). He did not merely throw up his hands in despair, or weep helplessly, or curse and swear at the Athenians. No, he shared with them the good news of Jesus. He sought by the proclamation of the gospel to prevail on them to turn from their idols to the living God and so to give to him and to his Son the glory due to their name. The stirrings of his spirit with righteous indignation opened his mouth in testimony. We observe the three groups with whom Luke tells us he spoke. First, following his usual practice, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath and 'reasoned' there with both Jews and God-fearers. As in Thessalonica, so in Athens, he will have delineated the Christ of Scripture, proclaimed the Jesus of history, and identified the two as the heaven-sent Saviour of sinners. Secondly, he went into the *agora*, which has now been completely excavated and restored, and which did duty as both market-place and centre of public life, and argued there with 'casual passers-by' (**NEB**), not now on the sabbath but *day by day*. He seems deliberately to have adopted the famous Socratic method of dialogue, involving questions and answers; he was, in fact, a kind of Christian Socrates, although with a better gospel than Socrates ever knew.

Thirdly, Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him, and he with

¹³ *Henry Martyn; Confessor of the Faith* by Constance E. Padwick (IVF, 1953), p. 146.

them. These were contemporary but rival systems. The Epicureans, or ‘philosophers of the garden’, founded by Epicurus (died 270 BC), considered the gods to be so remote as to take no interest in, and have no influence on, human affairs. The world was due to chance, a random concourse of atoms, and there would be no survival of death, and no judgment. So human beings should pursue pleasure, especially the serene enjoyment of a life detached from pain, passion and fear. The Stoics, however, or ‘philosophers of the porch’ (the *stoa* or painted colonnade next to the *agora* where they taught), founded by Zeno (died 265 BC), acknowledged the supreme god but in a pantheistic way, confusing him with the ‘world soul’. The world was determined by fate, and human beings must pursue their duty, resigning themselves to live in harmony with nature and reason, however painful this might be, and develop their own self-sufficiency. To oversimplify, it was characteristic of Epicureans to emphasize chance, escape and the enjoyment of pleasure, and of the Stoics to emphasize fatalism, submission and the endurance of pain. In Paul’s later speech to the Areopagus we hear echoes of the encounter between the gospel and these philosophies, as he refers to the caring activity of a personal Creator, the dignity of human beings as his ‘offspring’, the certainty of judgment and the call to repentance.

One cannot help admiring Paul’s ability to speak with equal facility to religious people in the synagogue, to casual passers-by in the city square, and to highly sophisticated philosophers both in the *agora* and when they met in Council. Today the nearest equivalent to the synagogue is the church, the place where religious people gather. There is still an important place for sharing the gospel with church-goers, God-fearing people on the fringe of the church, who may attend services only occasionally. The equivalent of the *agora* will vary in different parts of the world. It may be a park, city square or street corner, a shopping mall or market-place, a ‘pub’, neighbourhood bar, café, discothèque or student cafeteria, wherever people meet when they are at leisure. There is a need for gifted evangelists who can make friends and gossip the gospel in such informal settings as these. As for the Areopagus, it has no precise equivalent in the contemporary world. Perhaps the nearest is the university, where many of the country’s intelligentsia are to be found. Neither church evangelism nor street evangelism would be appropriate for them. Instead, we should develop home evangelism in which there is free discussion, ‘Agnostics Anonymous’ groups in which no holds are barred, and lecture evange-

lism, which contains a strong apologetic content. There is an urgent need for more Christian thinkers who will dedicate their minds to Christ, not only as lectures, but also as authors, journalists, dramatists and broadcasters, as television script-writers, producers and personalities, and as artists and actors who use a variety of art forms in which to communicate the gospel. All these can do battle with contemporary non-Christian philosophies and ideologies in a way which resonates with thoughtful, modern men and women, and so at least gain a hearing for the gospel by the reasonableness of its presentation. Christ calls human beings to humble, but not to stifle, their intellect.

4. What Paul said

Paul's evangelistic dialogue with Jews, God-fearers, passers-by and philosophers may well have continued for many days. It led to one of the greatest opportunities of his whole ministry, the presentation of the gospel to the world-famous, supreme council of Athens, the Areopagus. How did this come about? The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers reacted to Paul's message in two ways. *Some of them* insulated him. They asked, 'What is this babbler trying to say?' (18b). *Babbler* translates *spermologos*, which Ramsay calls 'a word of characteristically Athenian slang'.¹⁴ Its literal meaning is a 'seed-picker', and it was used of various seed-eating or scavenging birds, the rook for instance in Aristophanes' comedy *The Birds*. Hence the suggested rendering 'cook sparrow'.¹⁵ From birds it was applied to human beings, vagrants or beggars who live off scraps of food they pick up in the gutter, 'gutter-snipes'. Then thirdly it was used particularly to describe teachers who, not having an original idea in their own heads, unscrupulously plagiarize from others, picking up scraps of knowledge from here and there, 'zealous seekers of the second-rate at second hand',¹⁶ until their system is nothing but a ragbag of other people's ideas and sayings. Hence this 'ignorant plagiarist',¹⁷ 'this charlatan' (NEB), 'this parrot' (JB), this 'intellectual magpie'.¹⁸

Others (among the philosophers) remarked, 'He seems to be advocating foreign gods',

¹⁴ Ramsay, *St Paul*, p. 242.

¹⁵ BC, IV, p. 211; JBP.

¹⁶ BC, IV, p. 211.

¹⁷ Ramsay, *St Paul*, p. 241.

¹⁸ Hanson, p. 176.

which was one of the charges brought against Socrates 450 years previously. *They said this*, Luke comments, *because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection (18c)*. The word for gods here is *daimonia*, which did not always mean ‘demons’, but could be used of ‘lesser gods’, in this case ‘foreign divinities’ (RSV). It is possible that the philosophers, grasping that the essence of Paul’s message was *ton Jēsoun kai tēn anastasin (Jesus and the resurrection)* thought that he was introducing into Athens a couple of new divinities, a male god called ‘Jesus’ and his female consort ‘Anastasis’. Chrysostom was the first to make this suggestion,¹⁹ and a number of commentators have followed him. F. F. Bruce goes further and writes: ‘In the ears of some frequenters of the Agora these two words sounded as if they denoted the personified and deified powers of “healing” (*iasis*) and “restoration”.’²⁰ It is interesting, as Dr Conrad Gempf has pointed out to me, that both Paul’s speeches to pagans in the Acts seem to have been occasioned by a misunderstanding. ‘The Athenians imagine two new gods, while the Lystrans think they are seeing two old ones! Could Luke be warning his readers of ways in which pagans misunderstand?’

Whatever the precise motive of the philosophers may have been, *they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? (19). You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean’ (20). (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas) (21)*.

The word ‘Areopagus’ means literally ‘the Hill (*pagos*) of Ares (the Greek equivalent of Mars)’, so ‘Mars’ Hill’. Situated a little north-west of the Acropolis, it was formerly the place where the most venerable judicial court of ancient Greece met. For this reason the name came to be transferred from the place to the court. By Paul’s day, although cases were sometimes heard there, the court had become more a council, with its legal powers diminished. Its members were rather guardians of the city’s religion, morals and education, and it normally met in the ‘Royal Porch’ of the Agora. Two questions now face us. First, was Paul brought to the hill, or before the court/council, or both? Various answers are given, but surely the expressions that he stood ‘in the midst’ of the Areopagus (22, literally) and later went out ‘from their midst’ (33, literally) would more natu-

¹⁹ Chrysostom, *Homily XXXVIII*, p. 233.

²⁰ Bruce, *English*, p. 351; *Greek*, p. 333.

rally refer to people than to a place. It seems almost certain, then, that he addressed that august senate, and it does not matter much where the meeting took place.

Secondly, was Paul's speech before the court of the Areopagus a defence or a sermon? Some students, especially those who consider his address to have been an inadequate presentation of the gospel (since the cross does not appear to have been central to it), try to protect Paul's reputation by arguing that he was defending himself, not preaching Christ. This is certainly a possibility, since the court did still have some judicial functions. In particular, it had jurisdiction over religion in the city and, since Paul was being accused of introducing new goods (18), it would have to take cognizance and adjudicate. So the statement in verse 19 that *they took him* could be translated 'they took hold of him' (RSV) in the sense of arresting him. But the case against this proposal is strong. The 'context is without a vestige of judicial process'.²¹ There seem to have been no legal charge, no prosecutor, no presiding judge, no verdict and no sentence. At the same time, although Paul was not subjected to any formal interrogation, he was asked to give an account of his teaching. One may therefore regard the situation as 'as informal inquiry by the education commission', who regarded him with 'slightly contemptuous indulgence',²² so that 'he might either receive the freedom of the city to preach or be censored and silenced'.²³ Consequently, he told the court what he believed and taught, but in so doing made a quite personal statement of the gospel. As we have already seen when Peter and John stood before the Sanhedrin, and as we shall see again in trial scenes in Jerusalem and Caesarea, the apostles seemed incapable of defending themselves without at the same time preaching Christ. As for Paul in Athens, it required an uncommon degree of courage to speak as he spoke, for it would be hard to imagine a less receptive or more scornful audience.

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: 'Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious (22). For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you' (23). The apostle took as his text, or rather as his point of contact with them, the anonymous altar he had

²¹ Alexander, II, p. 149.

²² Gärtner, p. 65.

²³ Longenecker, *Acts*, p. 474.

come across. Reference to such altars, inscribed to an unknown god, have been found in ancient literature. Pausanias, for example, who travelled extensively in about AD 175 and wrote in his *Tour of Greece* his admiring account of the glory, history and mythology of that country, began his itinerary in Athens. Landing on the rocky peninsula called Piraeus, five miles south-west of the city, he found near the harbour a number of temples, together with 'altars of the gods named Unknown'.²⁴ Having seen such an altar himself, Paul was able to make his opening courteous remark about their religiosity. He was not ready yet to challenge the folly of Athenian idolatry. But he did take up their own acknowledgement of their ignorance. How then shall we interpret his statement that 'what' they were worshipping 'as something unknown' he was about to proclaim to them? Was he thereby acknowledging the authenticity of their pagan worship, and should we regard with equal charity the cultus of non-Christian religions? For example, is Raymond Panikkar justified, in *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, in writing: 'In the footsteps of St Paul, we believe that we may speak not only of the unknown God of the Greeks but also of the hidden Christ of Hinduism'?²⁵ Is he further justified in concluding that 'the good and bona fide Hindu is saved by Christ and not by Hinduism, but it is through the sacraments of Hinduism, through the message of morality and the good life, through the mysterion that comes down to him through Hinduism, that Christ saves the Hindu normally'?²⁶

No, this popular reconstruction cannot be maintained. We certainly agree that there is only one God. It is also true that converts, who turn to Christ from a non-Christian religious system, usually think of themselves not as having transferred their worship from one God to Another, but as having begun now to worship in truth the God they were previously trying worship in ignorance, error or distortion. But N. B. Stonehouse is right that what Paul picked out for comment was the Athenians' open acknowledgement of their ignorance, and that 'the ignorance rather than the worship is thus understood'.²⁷ Moreover, Paul made the bold claim to enlighten their ignorance (a Jew pre-

²⁴ Pausanias' *Description of Greece* in 6 volumes, of the Loeb Classical Library, ed. W. H. S. Jones, vol. I, 1918, Book I.1.4.

²⁵ *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* by Raymond Panikkar (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964), p. 137.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

suming to teach ignorant Athenians!), using the *egō* of apostolic authority, and insisting thereby that special revelation must control and correct whatever general revelation seems to disclose. He then went on to proclaim the living and true God in five ways, and so to expose the errors, even horrors, of idolatry.

First, God is the Creator of the universe: *The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands* (24). This view of the world is very different from either the Epicurean emphasis on a chance combination of atoms or the virtual pantheism of the Stoics. Instead, God is both the personal Creator of everything that exists and the personal Lord of everything he has made. It is absurd, therefore, to suppose that he who made and supervises everything lives in shrines which human beings have built. Any attempt to limit or localize the Creator God, to imprison him within the confines of manmade buildings, structures or concepts, is ludicrous.

Secondly, God is the Sustainer of life: *And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else* (25). God continues to sustain the life which he has created and given to his human creatures. It is absurd, therefore, to suppose that he who sustains life should himself need to be sustained, that he who supplies our need should himself need our supply. Any attempt to tame or domesticate God, to reduce him to the level of a household pet dependent on us for food and shelter, is again a ridiculous reversal of roles. We depend on God; he does not depend on us.

Thirdly, God is the Ruler of all the nations: *From one man* (the Western text 'of one blood' is surely mistaken; Adam is in view as the single progenitor of the human race) *he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live* (26). *God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us* (27). *'For in him we live and move and have our being'* (28a). Some commentators think that Paul's reference here to 'times' and 'places' (26) is to God's preparation of the planet earth to be our human habitation, and to his provision of the regular seasons, which Paul had mentioned in Lystra (14:17). The nations' 'times' and 'places', however, seem to be more particular than this, and to refer rather to 'the epochs of their history

²⁷ Stonehouse, p. 19.

and the limits of their territory' (NEB). Thus, although God cannot be held responsible for the tyranny or aggression of individual nations, yet both the history and the geography of each nation are ultimately under his control. Further, God's purpose in this has been so that the human beings he has made in his own image might *seek him, and perhaps reach out for him*, or 'feel after him' (RSV), a verb which 'denotes the groping and fumbling of a blind man',²⁸ *and find him*. Yet this hope is unfulfilled because of human sin, as the rest of Scripture makes clear. Sin alienates people from God even as, sensing the unnaturalness of their alienation, they grope for him. It would be absurd, however, to blame God for this alienation, or to regard him as distant, unknowable, uninterested. For *he is not far from each one of us*. It is we who are far from him. If it were not for sin which separates us from him, he would be readily accessible to us. For '*in him we live and move and have our being*'—a quotation from the 6th century BC poet Epimenides of Cnossos in Crete.

Fourthly, God is the Father of human beings: *As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring' (28b). Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill (29)*. This second quotation comes from the 3rd century Stoic author Aratus, who came from Paul's native Cilicia, although he may have been echoing an earlier poem by the Stoic philosopher Cleanthes. It is remarkable that Paul should thus have quoted from two pagan poets.²⁹ His precedent gives us warrant to do the same, and indicates that glimmerings of truth, insights from general revelation, may be found in non-Christian authors. At the same time we need to exercise caution, for in stating that 'we are his offspring', Aratus was referring to Zeus, and Zeus is emphatically not identical with the living and true God. But is it right that all human beings are God's offspring (*genos*)? Yes, it is. Although in redemption terms God is the Father only of those who are in Christ, and we are his children only by adoption and grace, yet in creation terms God is the Father of all humankind, and all are his offspring, his creatures, receiving their life from him. Moreover, because we are his offspring, whose being derives from him and depends on him, it is absurd to think of him as *like gold or silver or stone*, which are lifeless in themselves and which owe their being to human imagination and art. Paul

²⁸ Williams, p. 204.

²⁹ Paul also quoted from Menander (1 Cor. 15:33) and again from Epimenides (Tit. 1:12).

quotes their own poets to expose their own inconsistency.

These are powerful arguments. All idolatry, whether ancient or modern, primitive or sophisticated, is inexcusable, whether the images are metal or mental, material objects of worship or unworthy concepts in the mind. For idolatry is the attempt either to localize God, confining him within limits which we impose, whereas he is the Creator of the universe; or to domesticate God, making him dependent on us, taming and taping him, whereas he is the Sustainer of human life; or to alienate God, blaming him for his distance and his silence, whereas he is the Ruler of nations, and not far from any of us; or to dethrone God, demoting him to some image of our own contrivance or craft, whereas he is our Father from whom we derive our being. In brief, all idolatry tries to minimize the gulf between the Creator and his creatures, in order to bring him under our control. More than that, it actually reverses the respective positions of God and us, so that, instead of our humbly acknowledging that God has created and rules us, we presume to imagine that we can create and rule God. There is no logic in idolatry; it is a perverse, topsy-turvy expression of our human rebellion against God. It leads to Paul's last point.

Fifthly, God is the Judge of the world: *In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent (30). For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead (31).* Paul reverts at the end of his address to the topic with which he began: human ignorance. The Athenians have acknowledged in their altar inscription that they are ignorant of God, and Paul has been giving evidence of their ignorance. Now he declares such ignorance to be culpable. For God has never 'left himself without testimony' (14:17). On the contrary, he has revealed himself through the natural order, but human beings 'suppress the truth by their wickedness'.³⁰ *In the past God overlooked such ignorance.* It is not that he did not notice it, nor that he acquiesced in it as excusable, but that in his forbearing mercy he did not visit upon it the judgment it deserved.³¹ *But now he commands all people everywhere to repent.* Why? Because of the certainty of the coming judgment. Paul tells his listeners three immutable facts about it. First, it will be universal: *God will judge the world.* The living

³⁰ Rom. 1:18.

³¹ Cf. Rom. 3:25.

and the dead, the high and the low, will be included; nobody will be able to escape. Secondly, it will be righteous: *he will judge ... with justice*. All secrets will be revealed. There will be no possibility of any miscarriage of justice. Thirdly, it will be definite, for already the day has been set and the judge has been appointed. And although the day has not yet been disclosed, the identity of the judge has been (10:42). God has committed the judgment to his Son,³² and *he has given proof of this publicly to everybody by raising him from the dead*. By the resurrection Jesus was vindicated, and declared to be both Lord and Judge. Moreover this divine judge is also *the man*. All nations have been created from the first Adam; through the last Adam all nations will be judged.

This mention of the resurrection, which had prompted the philosophers to ask to hear more (18), was now enough to bring the meeting to an abrupt end. *When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, even 'burst out laughing' (JB), perhaps the Epicureans, but others said, whether sincerely or not, perhaps the Stoics, 'We want to hear you again on this subject' (32). At that, Paul left the Council (33), for the meeting was adjourned. However, a few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, whom Eusebius later identified (though on insufficient evidence) as Athens' first Christian bishop and martyr, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others (34)*. These must all have responded to the summons to repent, and 'turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God'.³³

As we reflect on Paul's address to the Areopagus, we have to face two criticisms of it, first that it was not authentic, and secondly that it was not adequate. Earlier in this century Martin Dibelius concluded that the speech was intended by Luke to be a sample of the kind of preaching to pagans which he considered appropriate, that it was composed by Luke not Paul, and that it is a 'Hellenistic' speech about the knowledge of God, which is not Christian until its conclusion.³⁴ Some years later, Hans Conzelmann wrote: 'In my own opinion the speech is the free creation of the author (sc. Luke), for it does not show the specific thoughts and ideas of Paul.'³⁵ In 1955, however, the Swedish scholar

³² Cf. Jn. 5:27.

³³ 1 Thes. 1:9.

³⁴ Dibelius, 'Paul on the Areopagus', in *Studies*, pp. 76–77.

³⁵ From Conzelmann's contribution to Keck-Martyn, p. 218.

Bertil Gärtner decisively answered Dibelius in an essay entitled *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*. His thesis was (i) that the background to the speech is to be found rather in Hebrew than in Greek thought, and especially in the Old Testament; (ii) that it has parallels in the apologetic preaching of Hellenistic Judaism; and (iii) that it is genuinely Pauline in the sense that its main features reflect Paul's thought in his letters,³⁶ although of course Luke has abbreviated it and put it into its present literary form. So it is not difficult to affirm with a good conscience that the voice we hear in the Areopagus address is the voice of the authentic Paul. Nor is it difficult to find Old Testament passages which anticipate the main themes of the sermon—God as Creator of heaven and earth, in whose hand is the breath of all living things, who does not live in man-made temples, who overrules the history of nations, who is not to be likened to graven or carved images, which are dead and dumb, and who warns of judgment and summons to repentance.

The second criticism concerns the adequacy of the sermon as a gospel presentation. Ramsay popularized the notion in his day that Paul 'was disappointed and perhaps disillusioned by his experience in Athens', since the results were negligible. So 'when he went on from Athens to Corinth, he no longer spoke in the philosophic style', but "'determined not to know anything save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2)'.³⁷ This is a gratuitous theory, however, which I think Stonehouse was fair to pronounce 'quite untenable'.³⁸ First, there is no trace in Luke's narrative that he is displeased with Paul's performance in Athens, whether we are to regard his address to the Areopagus as a defence or a sermon or a bit of both. On the contrary, Luke records three of Paul's speeches in the Acts as samples respectively of his proclamation to Jews and God-fearers (Pisidian Antioch, chapter 13), to illiterate pagans (Lystra, chapter 14) and now to cultured philosophers (Athens, chapter 17). Secondly, it is inaccurate to dub Paul's visit to Athens a failure. In addition to the two named converts, Luke says that there were 'a number of others' (34). Besides, 'it is most precarious to engage in rationalizing from the number of converts to the correctness of the message'.³⁹ Thirdly, I believe Paul did

³⁶ E.g. Rom. 1:18ff.

³⁷ Ramsay, *St Paul*, p. 252.

³⁸ Stonehouse, p. 33.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

preach the cross in Athens. Luke provides only a short extract from his speech, which takes less than two minutes to read. Paul must have filled out this outline considerably, and his conclusion (30–31) must have included Christ crucified. For how could he proclaim the resurrection without mentioning the death which preceded it? And how could he call for repentance without mentioning the faith in Christ which always accompanies it? Fourthly, what Paul renounced in Corinth was not the biblical doctrine of God as Creator, Lord and Judge, but the wisdom of the world and the rhetoric of the Greeks. His firm ‘decision’ to preach nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified was taken because of the anticipated challenges of proud Corinth, not because of his supposed failure in Athens. Besides, as Luke shows in his narrative, Paul did not change his tactic in Corinth, but continued to teach, argue and persuade (18:4–5).

5. How Paul challenges us

The Areopagus address reveals the comprehensiveness of Paul’s message. He proclaimed God in his fullness as Creator, Sustainer, Ruler, Father and Judge. He took in the whole of nature and of history. He passed the whole of time in review, from the creation to the consummation. He emphasized the greatness of God, not only as the beginning and the end of all things, but as the One to whom we owe our being and to whom we must give account. He argued that human beings already know these things by natural or general revelation, and that their ignorance and idolatry are therefore inexcusable. So he called on them with great solemnity, before it was too late, to repent.

Now all this is part of the gospel. Or at least it is the indispensable background to the gospel, without which the gospel cannot effectively be preached. Many people are rejecting our gospel today not because they perceive it to be false, but because they perceive it to be trivial. People are looking for an integrated world-view which makes sense of all their experience. We learn from Paul that we cannot preach the gospel of Jesus without the doctrine of God, or the cross without the creation, or salvation without judgment. Today’s world needs a bigger gospel, the full gospel of Scripture, what Paul later in Ephesus was to call ‘the whole purpose of God’ (20:27, NEB).

It is not only the comprehensiveness of Paul’s message in Athens which is impressive, however, but also the depth and power of his motivation. Why is it that, in spite of the great needs and opportunities of our day, the church slumbers peacefully on, and that

so many Christians are deaf and dumb, deaf to Christ's commission and tongue-tied in testimony? I think the major reason is this: we do not speak as Paul spoke because we do not feel as Paul felt. We have never had the paroxysm of indignation which he had. Divine jealousy has not stirred within us. We constantly pray 'Hallowed be your Name', but we do not seem to mean it, or to care that his Name is so widely profaned.

Why is this? It takes us a stage further back. If we do not speak like Paul because we do not feel like Paul, this is because we do not see like Paul. That was the order: he saw, he felt, he spoke. It all began with his eyes. When Paul walked round Athens, he did not just 'notice' the idols. The Greek verb used three times (16, 22, 23) is either *theōreō* or *anatheōreō* and means to 'observe' or 'consider'. So he looked and looked, and thought and thought, until the fires of holy indignation were kindled within him. For he saw men and women, created by God in the image of God, giving to idols the homage which was due to him alone.

Idols are not limited to primitive societies; there are many sophisticated idols too. An idol is a god-substitute. Any person or thing that occupies the place which God should occupy is an idol. Covetousness is idolatry.⁴⁰ Ideologies can be idolatries.⁴¹ So can fame, wealth and power, sex, food, alcohol and other drugs, parents, spouse, children and friends, work, recreation, television and possessions, even church, religion and Christian service. Idols always seem particularly dominant in cities. Jesus wept over the impenitent city of Jerusalem. Paul was deeply pained by the idolatrous city of Athens. Have we ever been provoked by the idolatrous cities of the contemporary world?

⁴⁰ Eph. 5:5.

⁴¹ See, for example, *Idols of our Time* by Bob Goudzwaard (1981: IVP, 1984).