Acts 17:1–15

Empire in Uproar: Thessalonica and Beroea

"These men … have turned the world upside down …" (17:6) is a charge well documented throughout Acts. The trumped-up charges which jealous Jews in Thessalonica bring against Paul and Silas have more than a grain of truth in them. Even though the disciples are not the political threat the people and the authorities fear, the Empire is not secure with these Christians on the loose, Christians who teach "that there is another King, Jesus" (17:7) (see *Reflection: The Politics of Luke*).

Paul and Silas receive a better reception at the synagogue in Beroea (17:10–14), whose members were "more noble than those in Thessalonica" and examined "the scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (17:11). The implication is that if their fellow Jews had taken the effort to search the promises of Scripture like the Jews in Beroea, they would have discovered that the proclamation of Silas and Paul is true to the Scriptures of Israel. All went well until the Thessalonian Jews stirred up trouble in Beroea as well.

Even at this rather late stage in the gentile mission, we note that (1) Paul continues to go first to the synagogues, to those who ponder the Scriptures and that (2) not all Jews reject the gospel; the reception continues to be mixed. We are not, at least at this point, to give either response prominence. When the word is taught—even for three Sabbaths in succession (v. 2)—we must realistically acknowledge that some will reject. Yet our realism is combined with the optimistic confidence that many believe—even not a few leading Greek men and women! Is Luke bragging about Paul's success in attracting influential people to the faith or is he marveling that the Spirit is able to convert *even* people of "high standing"?

Acts 17:16–34

Paul in Athens Before Cultured Idolaters

We have seen the power of the gospel to reach rich and poor, Jew and gentile, slave and free, male and female. But can the gospel hold its own in the sophisticated intellectual environment of a university town? Luke takes Paul to Athens, to the heart of the

very best of pagan culture, the town of Pericles and of Plato.

Frankly, Paul is unimpressed. The sculptures of Phidias move him not. Good Jew that he is, Paul sees Athens as little more than a wasteland "full of idols" (17:16). He argues with Jews, Epicureans, and Stoics, even those who look down their academic noses at this "babbler" (v. 18). Others, after much research and careful investigation, come to the stunning discovery that "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities" (v. 18), perhaps thinking to absorb whatever new gods Paul brings them into their pantheon of exotic divinities. Their legendary Athenian curiosity leads Paul into the Areopagus, where the Athenians spent their days doing what intellectuals enjoy—relieving their boredom by searching for new ideas. Novelty attracts their attention more quickly than truth. So much for pagan intelligence.

The setting gives Luke an opportunity for an attack upon and an evangelistic appeal to Christianity's cultured despisers. In a well constructed piece of classical rhetoric, Paul, a virtual Christian Socrates, first flatters his audience (vv. 22–23). Idolaters they may be, but at least they are searching; their impulse to worship is right even if the objects of their worship are wrong. He has seen their altar to "an unknown God" (v. 23). Their religious yearning, even though a bit of a scandal to a monotheistic Jew, is the inarticulate and uninformed yearning of the pagan for the God whom only the Scriptures can disclose.

Sometimes believers look with scorn upon the religious infatuations of Christianity's cultured despisers. Pagans criticize the Christian faith as being "simplistic," "pre-scientific," "superstitious" and then rush to the strange consolations of astrology, transcendental meditation, parapsychology, esoteric cults, or happy hearted humanism. And they have the nerve to call Christians simplistic! Yet Paul might say, as he said on Areopagus, that at least they are searching. They at least know that something else is needed to make sense out of life, to give coherence to the world. The church, rather than standing back from pagan religiosity, pointing our fingers in righteous indignation, should, like Paul in Athens, minister to their searching.

Paul continues. Appealing to their knowledge of creation (for he could not simply recite Scripture to pagans who were ignorant of Scripture) and to our common humanity, Paul asserts that his God "made the world and everything in it" (v. 24). This great God cannot be captured in "shrines made by man" (v. 24) but exists over the face of the

whole earth that we all may find our true purpose in his service alone (vv. 28–29). Until now pagan ignorance was overlooked, but now is the time to turn toward the one true God who has not only created the inhabitants of the world but will also judge them (v. 31).

In reasoning from the natural world toward faith in God, Luke's Paul borders upon a "natural theology"—our observation of the natural world and its wonders is a forerunner of faith. How can people look up at the stars or ponder the mysteries of the world without imagining a real, though still unknown, divine force behind it all? In citing the verses of a pagan poet (17:28), in drawing upon the pagan's experience of the world, Paul hopes to move them toward faith by way of the natural world. (The historical Paul used natural theology, not to appeal to pagans but to condemn pagan sinfulness—Rom. 1:18–23.)

Yet Paul cannot convert his audience through an exclusive appeal to their observation of the world. Revelation takes us where observation alone cannot go. Too many people look at growing grass and see only cells dividing, or into the sky and see masses of matter and swirling gas. Natural theology is hardly more than preliminary instruction. Something else is needed. Paul mentions the resurrection—a fact completely contrary to our observation of the way the world works. In nature things die, decay, decline. Death is death. What is done is done, over and finished, ended. Yet Paul concludes his speech with the assertion that for Christians the resurrection of Jesus is our "assurance." Not grass growing in spring, the return of the robin, the opening of the cocoon, or any other naturalistic drivel; the resurrection, something beyond the natural, is the final assurance that this one is "Lord of heaven and earth" (17:24).

In mentioning the resurrection, Paul risks rejection by his audience. They may agree to a created world and to our common humanity, but there is no possible "natural theology" evidence for an assertion of the resurrection. Appeals to reason and to observation of the natural world can only be taken so far in the proclamation of the gospel. Eventually revelation must be invoked and the scandal of faith to reason and experience must be made plain.

There are limits, limits imposed by the nature of the gospel, on the evangelist's ability to "become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). The response to Paul's address is much the same as he encountered elsewhere: Some

mocked (v. 32), others believed (v. 34)—including two prominent Athenians.

Christian proclamation is not to be judged merely by its success in winning an approving response. Where the Word is faithfully preached, some believe, some mock—for even the oratorical skill of Paul cannot remove the offense of the gospel, in fact it accentuates it.

Calvin charged that "the human mind is a perpetual factory for idols." Idolatry is not necessarily the pastime of the ignorant and the simple. Intellectuals play the game quite well. Natural inquisitiveness and delight in the novel and the strange, so prevalent in the academy, can be little more than the itch for some new graven image. The God whom Paul proclaims is not just another option for human devotion, not an accommodating God content to be one among many. The God who sent the Christ is still the Holy One of Israel, a jealous deity without rivals, an exclusive lover who tolerates no competition—money, sex, philosophical ideals, institutions—who fiercely judges all idols made by hands or minds of men.