

Telling the Story (Evangelism in the Early Church)

Maurice W. Lusk, III

Paul and company (Silas, Timothy, Luke, *et.al.*), continues to search for venues in which to announce that the long awaited Messiah has come. He searches out Jewish synagogues in keeping with the agenda, “to the Jews first and then to the gentiles” (Rom 1:16). This Paul does by focusing on cities wherein significant numbers of Jews are in residence. From Thessalonica he went to Berea, and from there to the major city of Greece, ancient Athens, the intellectual center of the Mediterranean world; first, to the Jews of the Diaspora, then to the philosophical elite of the Greeks.

Paul was waiting for them [Silas and Timothy] in Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, beholding the city full of idols. 17 therefore, he was reasoning (dialegomai – discourse, reason), in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the godfearers, and in the market-place every day with those who were there (Acts 17:16-17).

As Paul came into Athens he beheld a city “full of idols.” Athens was an ancient Greek city with a long history of idolatry. There were statues of the gods and goddesses of Greek mythology everywhere, the most prominent being the Parthenon with the colossal image of Athena, surrounded by a host of statues of the traditional Olympian deities. Paul first searches out a synagogue of the Jews and enters into discussion with the elders of the synagogue and the ones fearing God (godfearers) concerning the identity of the Messiah and the good news that he has come. He then went to the marketplace (**Agora**) and day after day, as did many of the cynics and street preacher the Greeks called sophists, he cried out in a proclamation that a divine deliverer had be sent into the world, which they understood as “a proclamation of strange *daimonion*

(spirit beings),” because he was “speaking of the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.” His method was to arouse the interest of those who would listen to him and then engage them in an investigation of what he had said that had aroused their interest

Paul Encounters the Epicureans and Stoics (17:18-21)

And some of the Epicurean and of Stoic philosophers were having conversation with him, and some were saying, “What is this word collector trying to say?” and others, “He seems to be a proclaimer of strange daimonion (spirit beings, good or evil),” because he was speaking of the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. 19 They took him to the Areopagus, who said, “We are authorized (dunametha – empowered) to inquire about this new teaching being spoken by you, 20 for strange things have come to our hearing and we wish to know what these things mean,” 21 (now, all Athenians and sojourning strangers want for nothing but to hear something new), (17:18-21).

Many of the schools of philosophy of the Classical period of Ancient Greece yet had a presence in Athens. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, the greatest of the Greek thinkers, were no longer present but their teachings were, as were the teachings of Epicures, Zeno, and others. The schools of Epicures and Zeno were in prominence in Athens and were the virtual opposites of one another.

Epicures taught that life should be an experience of better things than the mundane matters of existence. To pursue the greater pleasures of life such as the leisure of learning and contemplation was a far greater pursuit than accepting life as an existence determined by fate. Epicureanism has been understood as a hedonistic pursuit of sensual pleasure, but this is far from the teachings of Epicures, whose views were similar to those of Socrates, that man must pursue the greater questions of his existence, the unexamined life is not worth living, and that every man’s life was his own to determine.

Zeno was the founder of the Stoic school, taken from the Greek word "*stoa*," (porch) from the balcony on which Zeno stood when he lectured to his disciples. He taught that life was determined by fate and one must learn that "life is what it is;" one must accept his fate and take charge of his life in view of that reality. One is not a victim of fate but a trustee of it and he must play out the lot given him if he is to live an honorable life. The stoic view is well expressed in the poem *Invictus*, by William Earnest Henely,

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul.

Stoicism saw life as something to live out without the anxiety that comes with the freedom of choice. To them life is what it is, embraced it and live with it without the concern that comes with questions of "why." The Epicureans, however, chose to see life as a venture in contemplation and sought the life that would allow them "leisure" (from the Latin *licere* meaning "to have license or permission to do what one desires"). Here in the *Agora*, a large courtyard or town square in the center of Athens, Paul takes a prominent place and begins to herald the news of the coming of God

into the world through a Redeemer to deliver the human race from its self-destruction. This is the message of salvation further developed in Paul's letters; especially, Ephesians and Colossians, whose cultural background reflected the same cultural mind-set as that of Athens.

There were numerous redeemer figures among the mythological deities found throughout the Mediterranean world of this period. **Adonis** and **Attis** of Greece, and **Osiris** of Egypt, were deities (called *daimonion* - otherworldly beings of power) of the Mystery Religions, whose myths told of their deaths at the beginning of the winter season and their return to life at the arrival of the spring season.

These gods were fertility deities whose myths had developed in agrarian societies to give meaning to the four seasons of the agricultural year. None, however, were claimed to have been historical figures that had actually walked among men in life; no one claimed to have seen them risen, nor was there any testimony claiming that they had actually walked among men. Paul was saying the same thing here that he said in 1 Cor 15:1-8 and in Acts 26:12-19. He was telling them that what they believed in the myths of their culture had actually happened as an historical event. There is little wonder as to why they were conflicted by what he was saying. He was clearly not speaking of these fertility deities with which they were familiar; so, they would take him to the Areopagus council for further inquiry.

Paul Addresses the Athenian Areopagus (17:22-25)

Paul, having stood in the midst of the Areopagus, said, Men, Athenians, in all things I observe that you are very religious; 23 for passing through and beholding your objects of worship, I found also an altar on which had been inscribed: "To the Unknown God." Therefore, what you worship not knowing, this I proclaim to you.

Paul stands (the posture of the orator), in the midst of the Areopagus, encircled by the members of the council or facing them in a semi-circle, and addresses them in a formal fashion. In this same city the great Socrates had been condemned by the Athenian elders for insisting that the gods of mythology were not beings of real existence. In fact, his student Plato writes (*Timaeus*, in *The Dialogues of Plato*) of Socrates' belief that there must be a "prime mover" or "world soul" who was the single craftsman of the universe. This is essentially what Paul says to them here in his opening words.

Paul begins with the recognition of the fact that they were a religious people, "I observe that you are very religious," is a better translation than that they are very superstitious; which in English suggests something of an insult. Paul is smarter than that. The word translated "very religious" is *deisi-dimonisteros*, a compound of two words: *deido* - to be afraid + *diamon* - an otherworldly spirit being. The word Paul uses here means, "to fear otherworldly beings." So, Paul says what is said in our world today when we speak of people being religious.

After having acknowledged them as a religious people, he then makes reference to the presence of statues in the city representing the numerous gods and goddesses of the Athenian people. Paul does not call them idols but *sebasma* - an object of worship. He then speaks of a *bomos*, a raised place on which something is placed, located somewhere in the city. There was no statue or idol on this raised platform; rather, only an inscription reading, "To an (not "the") unknown God." There was no deity whose name they did not know; rather, this was an attempt to provide a seat at the table for a guest who might show up at the banquet having been overlooked in the sending out of the invitations.

Paul knows what this is all about; so, he uses it to introduce the Athenians to the God of Israel. "Therefore, what you reverence not knowing, this I proclaim to you." Paul uses the opening to introduce them to the God of Israel as the Creator of the universe. This would not be something they had not heard before. As mentioned above, Socrates had introduced his belief in a "World Soul," who was the

Prime Mover (first cause) of all that moves (the forces of energy and matter). Socrates called him "the Craftsman of the Universe," essentially, the Creator (*Timeaus*). The Athenian elders had not been capable of refuting the arguments of Socrates; so, in order to quiet him they condemned him of perverting the youth of Athens by attempting to destroy their traditional beliefs in the gods of Greek mythology.

The Fatherhood of God (17:24-25)

The God, the one having created the world and all things in it, this one, being Lord of heaven and earth does not dwell in temples made with hands, 25 neither is he served by the hands of men [as if] needing anything. He gives to all life, breath, and all things.

Paul uses the Greek "*ho theos*" for God, the Greek word used to translate *Elohim* in the Greek Septuagint. In Greek literature we see more of *diamon* and *theiotes*, than *theos*. Paul's use of *theos* with the definite article ("the") is also indicative of the Jew's concept of their God, he was not "a God," he was "the God." Following the expression, "the God," Paul adds a more definitive description of the God he is making known to the Athenians; this is *the God*, "*the one having created the world and all things in it.*" This was not one of the gods or spirits of Greek mythology; Paul was introducing them to "the Creator of the universe."

This is the first of Paul's major points in his presentation. The God of whom he speaks is the very Creator of life on earth; not only the whole of mankind but of everything that exists. Such a being does not dwell in stone temples, neither is he in need of the offerings of man. It is man who is in need of God, he provides for them; he is the giver of life on earth, of the breath that animates all living things. His relationship to mankind is that of fatherhood, man is his offspring. From here Paul moves to his second major point; if God is the father of all mankind, then mankind is a brotherhood, all are beings created in the image of God whether they act like it or not.

The Brotherhood of Man (17:26-29)

He made from one man every nation of mankind, to dwell upon all the face of the earth, having set in place and ordered seasons, and the boundaries of their habitations 27 to seek God, if perhaps they might feel after him and find him though he is not far from each one of us. 28 For in him we live, move about, and have being [and exists]; as also certain of your poets have said: "For of him we are offspring. 29 `Being, therefore, the offspring of God, we ought not to think that by the skill or ingenuity of man, with gold, or silver, or stone we may form an image of Deity.

Here Paul uses the Genesis account of the creation of mankind (Gen 1:26-27; 2:7; 1 Cor 15:45-49). Then, he follows with the Genesis account of the creation of the dwelling place of man, which he calls "the boundaries of their habitation." Because the God of whom Paul speaks is the Creator of life, breath, and all things, man finds himself constantly seeking God; Paul adds, "he is not far from each one of us," for we are his offspring. The God Paul presents made man; man should not think that he can make God or give God anything that he needs.

This was a climactic statement because his audience was filled with people who regularly bowed down to a form of an image of God made by man. Rather than understanding that man was a being created in the image of God, they attempted to create God in the image of man, and this reversal of reality must be realized and repentance (*metanoia* - a change of mind) must follow.

The Times of Ignorance God Overlooked (17:30-31)

So, the times of ignorance God having overlooked, does now command all men everywhere to repent, 31 in as much as he has set a day in which he is going to judge the world in righteousness, by a man whom he appointed and gave evidence to all, having raised him from the dead.

The expression “the times of ignorance” makes for some good discussion. The word “ignorance” is a translation of *agnoia*, meaning “no knowledge, to not know.” Ignorance is a state of mind or condition with reference to knowledge. How or why one is “ignorant” or “not knowing” (*agnosis* – agnostic) is another matter, whether willful ignorance or non-willful ignorance, Paul says that God overlooked or chose not to punish the behavior resulting from ignorance. The word “overlooked” is literally “to look over;” however, this view is expressed by Paul with a more definitive word in Rom 2:4,

Or do you think lightly of the riches of his kindness and tolerance and patience (makrothumias - longsuffering), not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? (Rom 2:4).

So also in the second letter of Peter 3:9, 14-15,

The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering (makrothumias) toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance . . .

14 Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; 15 and consider that the longsuffering (makrothumias) of our Lord is salvation – as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, (2 Peter 3:9, 14-15).

What Paul was saying to the Athenians was that even though God had been longsuffering as a result of his mercy, ignorance would no longer be overlooked, the time of repentance had come. He now commands all men everywhere to repent and has appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he appointed; Jesus is the exemplar of man’s moral behavior.

Later, in writing to the church in Roman while he was in Corinth, Paul makes a very similar argument. In Rom 1:18-21, Paul makes the argument that man has the ability to know of the existence of the one true God. Further, he insists that such knowledge requires of man that he live as the one who created him intended. He writes,

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, 21 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Rom 1:18-21).

Even though the primary themes of Paul's speech address "the Fatherhood of God" and "the Brotherhood of Man," in his concluding remarks he introduces the Athenians to Jesus of Nazareth, who walked the earth as one of us yet was God with us. He experienced the worst of human existence at the hands of those he came to redeem, but God acknowledge him as the one he had sent into the world for its deliverance by raising him out of death to be seen by those who knew him before his death.

Some Joined with Paul and Believed (17:33-34)

32 Hearing of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, but others said, "We will listen to you about this again." So Paul went forth from the midst of them, 34 and certain men joined with him and believed, among whom was also Dionysius the Areopagite [a member of the council of the Areopagus], and a woman, by the name of Damaris, and others with them.

The Athenians were divided over what they heard; some, but not all. Certain of them joined him and others decided they would listen to him more and as a result they believed. Among them was one of the members of the Areopagus council, Dionysius, whom Luke calls "the Areopagite," (i.e., a member of the Areopagite Council). According the church historian Eusebius, Dionysius became an *episkapos* (elder or shepherd) of the church in Athens (*Ecclesiastical History*, 3.4.11 and 4:23.3). In addition to him was a

woman about whom we know nothing more than her name, Damaris, that she became a believer, and that her name is memorialized in Scripture.

MWLIII