

There is an introductory matter to be considered. The culture in which we live today is very different from that in which our forefathers lived. There is no longer even a general nominal understanding of Bible truth, which was there in our grandparents' days. Indeed, there is an attitude abroad nowadays which denies that there is such a thing as absolute and universal spiritual truth anyway; pluralism is the in-word in our day—any religion is as true as any other. Truth is whatever is true for you, whoever you are, they say. We must surely recognise that as the background against which we have to go to talk to people about Bible truth (which is most certainly true for everybody!) We live on a 'Mars Hill' today.

I have an English dictionary which was published in 1932. I looked up the name 'Jesus' in order to see what definition was given. It simply read *Jesus: The Saviour*; and then it gave the Latin, the Greek and the Hebrew versions of that name. 'The Saviour' – I warmed to that.

I have another English dictionary published in 1975. Again, I looked up the name 'Jesus', curious to see what definition was given there. I read, *Source of the Christian religion, accepted by Christians as the Son of God ...* and there followed a brief outline of the main features of the life of Christ. It closed the paragraph with the comment, *the Christian doctrine is that after 3 days he rose from the dead.* I was a little uneasy at that. The resurrection of Christ is an historical fact, not merely an idea that only Christians believe.

There's a third dictionary in our home, this one published in 1990. Once more I looked to see what definition it gave for the name 'Jesus'.

This time I found that the dictionary offered two meanings: 1st. (*a colloquial interjection*), an

exclamation of surprise, or dismay, etc. And then 2nd. – and this was in brackets – (*Name of the founder of the Christian religion, died about AD 30*) – and that was all it said. So, in a period of 60 years or so, 1932 – 1990, the common definition of Jesus has moved from *The Saviour* to an *exclamation of surprise or dismay*.

So if our Lord should ask us today, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' (Matt. 16:13) our reply would need to be not, 'you are the Saviour', and not, 'you are the Son of God' – that's only what Christians say, apparently – but 'Lord, you are an exclamation of surprise or dismay'. And if you live in the society in which I live, your ears will already have told you that this is how the name of Jesus is commonly used; this is the cultural atmosphere in which we now live, and in which we have to speak about such an unpopular thing as unique, divine truth. We face a situation today in which so many of our fellow men and women, boys and girls, are biblically illiterate.

So I suggest that if we are to think seriously about our evangelism in these days, this illiteracy is something we must take full account of. We now have to go to people most of whom have no biblical knowledge. They do not understand our evangelical language; e.g. the words 'sin' and 'God' do not mean to them what they mean to us; the word 'gospel' (which is 'the glorious gospel' to us), has no special meaning for them at all. And I want to suggest we shall fail in our responsibility to reach them in faithful evangelism, unless we take such sad facts into account. And this brings us directly to Acts 17, and particularly to the summary that Luke gives us there of Paul's great sermon on Mars Hill.

1. ... 'To those not having the Law like one not having the Law'

On Mars Hill Paul was confronting people with no Old Testament Bible. Talking to Jews was one thing – they knew their Old Testament; and Paul made great use of the Old Testament promises when he spoke and wrote to Jews. But these Greeks now gathered around Paul knew nothing of the Old Testament. Talking to them is quite a different matter from talking to Jews. You notice that Paul now takes no quote from the Old Testament, as he reasons with them. He doesn't mention the Old Testament Bible, though everything he says is thoroughly biblical. Instead, he actually quotes from one of their own poets. It is a different approach, deliberately tailored to meet the special circumstances of his hearers.

I make the point that this is Paul's consistent method, when presenting the gospel to non-Jews – people without the Bible, people like those around us today. There is, for example, the brief account of what happened when the people of Lystra saw a miracle done by Paul (Acts 14:8–18). Again, Paul reasoned with them, not from the Old Testament, but from the fact of the natural creation and the goodness of the Creator. That was the only 'Bible' which those farmers of Lystra knew anything about.

In his letter to the church at Rome, which contained both Jews and Gentiles, Paul begins by addressing Gentiles in chapter 1, referring, (verses 19–20), to the evidence of the existence of God in the natural creation around them; again, that is the 'Bible' which Gentiles knew about. But in chapter 2 he turns to address the Jews (verse 17), and now he reasons from the Old Testament. So

the style of the sermon on Mars Hill was not a sudden thought, but was the *consistent* application, by Paul, of a biblical principle of communication in evangelising people who have no Bible.

Paul is deliberately *making himself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible*, as he said on one occasion (1 Cor. 9:19). When presenting Bible truth to pagans Paul restricts himself to the limited understanding of his hearers, in order to win as many as possible. *To those not having the law* – i.e. biblically illiterate Gentiles – he *became like one not having the law* (1 Cor. 9:21). In other words, Paul began where his hearers were in their understanding of things. And it wasn't only Paul who adopted this practice.

I find it interesting to see how Matthew's approach in writing his Gospel differs from that of Luke. You know how, as you read Matthew's Gospel, he repeatedly uses such phrases as *What was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled ...* and, *All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet ...* Matthew is writing for people who were familiar with the Old Testament prophecies. Matthew uses this formula something like 11 or 12 times.

Luke, on the other hand, doesn't use that formula (except on two occasions when he records what Jesus was saying to his own disciples, who were Jews, 21:22; 24:44). Luke, of course, was writing for Greek readers – his Gospel is addressed to *the most excellent Theophilus* (1:3). Whoever Theophilus was, it seems reasonable enough to suggest that he and other Greeks would not have had an intricate knowledge of the Hebrew Old Testament, as any Jew would have. Hence Luke does not make such use of Old Testament prophecies as Matthew does, because he wrote with a non-Jewish readership in mind.

Being *all things to all people* was not just a Pauline idea, you see. In fact, you can find the same principle being demonstrated throughout the Scriptures. I'd love to explore that with you more fully, but it is not convenient now, for there are other matters we must come to.

Paul, then, is here addressing a biblically illiterate people. Consequently he doesn't quote directly from the Old Testament—though without doubt everything he says is completely biblical. And if we are to be biblical in outreach to our biblically illiterate society, we need to learn from Paul; what this means in practice I hope to suggest presently.

2. Comparing the decline in Greek History with that in British History

But there is another parallel between Paul's situation and ours which is relevant to the matter of speaking to our neighbours of the Christian message today. There is quite an interesting similarity between the history of Athens before Paul arrived there, and recent English history which has led up to what our society is like today. The past is always the prologue of the present. Let me explain.

There was a time when Greece was a great world power, at the head of a huge empire. The influence of Greece stretched right out to Egypt, to Persia and on to the north of India. Some of the greatest human minds the world has known developed great literary, philosophical, artistic and architectural achievements in Greece which are still admired today. Pericles, Aristotle, Plato, Socrates – these are men whose renown rivals that of the great men of any nation.

But by Paul's day all that greatness had vanished.

By internal civil war, by disastrous conflicts with external enemies and by being taken over by the power of Rome, the glory of Greece – and of Athens in particular – faded and died away. Their great prosperity had led to proud self-confidence, and that in turn led to loss of moral fibre. The vigorous creative and ethical life of the nation was exhausted. It was in that cultural vacuum that the philosophies of the Epicureans and the Stoics arose, both of which have been described as 'philosophies of despair and cynicism'.

Perhaps you can recognise now something of the same sort of decline which shapes so much of the culture of our society today. For the glory of the once world-wide British Empire is a thing of distant memory now, and two great world wars have wearied our nation, too. We are no longer a great world power. The moral fibre of the nation is exhausted and philosophies of despair and cynicism have spawned again, here. We indeed are living on a 'Mars Hill'; so I suggest that gospel outreach around our homes today, if it is to be done responsibly as Paul did it, needs to follow the Pauline method. But this assumes what Paul did was the right thing to have done; was he right to do what he did? That question needs an answer.

3. Paul did not make a mistake in Athens

I think it important to deal with the suggestion – not uncommo – that the paucity of the converts recorded at the close of Paul's sermon indicates that he was mistaken in what he did on Mars Hill. E.g. William Ramsay, *St Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen*, 1895, p.252). It has been suggested that when Paul subsequently went on to Corinth he realised his mistake in Athens, and consequently wrote to the Corinthians:

When I came to you I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power (1 Cor. 2:1–4).

Now if it is true that Paul was wrong in Athens, then we have in Acts 17 a record of a serious Apostolic blunder. Did the Apostles make such serious mistakes? We know that Peter made a serious mistake as recorded in Galatians 2 – but we also there have a very clear indication that he was wrong. There is no such condemnation of Paul's sermon at Athens. I suggest that lack of condemnation must be significant.

In any case, it is not true to suggest that Paul so modified the gospel message in Athens that he omitted to mention *Christ and him crucified*. We are specifically told that Paul had been preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection (verse 18). To talk about Jesus is to talk about the Saviour; to talk about resurrection is to talk about a death. In those two facts you have the heart of the gospel message. In any case, we are specifically told (verse 18) *he did preach the good news – the evangel*.

Keep in mind the fact that it was in writing to this same Corinthian church that Paul indicated his careful practice of *becoming like one not having the law to those not having the law* (1 Cor. 9:21). He is telling them of his method of evangelism among biblically illiterate people. He is hardly likely to do that if, on Mars Hill, he made a grave mistake in what he did!

And, very significantly, the originator of the suggestion that Paul was wrong to do what he did in Athens later wrote,

I went too far ... I did not allow for the adaptation to different classes of hearers, in one case the tradesmen and middle classes of Corinth; in the other, the more strictly university and philosophic class in Athens.' (William Ramsay, *The teaching of Paul in Terms of the Present Day*, pp.110–111).

So the originator of the 'Pauline mistake' theory subsequently withdrew it.

Furthermore, Eusebius – the great historian of the early church – indicates that there was a church formed in Athens, and that Dionysius an Areopagite (one such was converted through Paul's ministry) was its first bishop. And although the Athens church seems to have had a chequered life initially, there is record of it again in AD 165, and also of it being represented at the Council of Nicea in the fourth century. Paul's brief visit to Athens was not fruitless; his sermon was not a mistake. But this leads us to a further comment.

4. As a Generalisation, Paucity of Conversions in a Biblically Illiterate Situation is Normal

The paucity of that initial response to Paul's preaching has a message for us in outreach around our homes today. It is a fact that the gospel always had greater success when preached on Jewish soil, or when presented to those who had been prepared for it by Old Testament knowledge, than in other circumstances. Think of the many thousands of converts from just one sermon in the earlier chapters of Acts, among Jews and proselytes who knew their Old Testament.

In contrast to that, nowhere in Bible records of preaching to non-Jews is anything like that success

recorded. This surely underlines the fact that in a biblically illiterate situation the progress of the gospel is commonly slow, unless exceptionally, the Spirit of God is miraculously present in unusual power. We long for that special work of the Spirit, but meanwhile we are responsible to continue presenting the Christian message in the spiritual wilderness around us. We should not be surprised, nor despondent, at the paucity of result, for that is merely stark evidence of the reality of the blindness of unbelieving minds, precisely confirming what the Bible teaches about the unspiritual nature of men and women before conversion.

Now that we have looked briefly at the background of the Areopagus sermon, and seen its relevance to us today, we can look in a little more detail at Paul's approach to his hearers and, hopefully, appreciate his method.

5. Analysis of the Pauline Method

We need, first, to notice how Paul deliberately sets out to create a relationship between himself and his hearers. And he does this in several significant ways. Luke carefully describes this deliberate 'bridge-building', in his record of the event.

1. Paul, Luke tells us, first *reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks* (verse 17a). That is typically Paul's approach; wherever there was a synagogue he went to find Jews and their proselytes, with whom he could reason from their Old Testament Scriptures. But Luke adds another comment; Paul, he says, *taught as well in the marketplace day-by-day with those who happened to be there* (verse 17b). Now that is a very illuminating comment.

Whereas, in the synagogue, Paul adopted the

Jewish method of teaching in a fixed time and place, in the market place of the city, where the great teacher Socrates once taught, Paul used the Socratic method of teaching – that is, dialogue and discussion with groups of people as they stroll about the market place daily. He began acting as a Jew to the Jews in the synagogue, but now, in the market place, acts as a Greek to the Greeks. Had he restricted himself to the synagogue alone Paul would never have reached the Greeks with the gospel message.

What Paul has done is to seize the special opportunity which the peculiarly Greek culture provided, and place his message carefully in that setting. Long before Paul reached Athens, a famous Greek writer complained that the people 'loved to play the part of listeners to the tales of others' doings'. Paul is taking advantage of that well-known characteristic of Athenians. Luke's comment in verse 21 is not sarcastic – it is factual. Athens was a university town where one could pick-up all the latest ideas, in the market place.

2. Paul relates what he has to say to something which is very relevant to his hearers. *Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious* (verse 23). Athens was crowded with temples, altars and 'sacred' grottoes. All around him, on Mars Hill, Paul could see some of the most famous temples in Greece. So he begins where his hearers are – they are very religious. The Athenians were proud of their distinction as being the most religious of all nations.

Paul used a slightly ambiguous word *very religious* (*deisidaimon* – AV 'superstitious') which was straight out of ancient Greek writers, and could have a complimentary or derogatory sense (Cf. 22:19 for

use of the term by Festus). Surrounded as he was by Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, the use of that ambiguous word would have caught their attentio – was Paul commending them or criticising? Paul is ‘bridge-building’ with great care. He is earning the right to speak. And then there comes the mention of that altar *to an unknown God*. So this man is going to talk about their own city, where there were a number of these altars – and he seems to be a very observant, relevant and knowledgeable fellow, especially if he knows the origin of those altars. Those are all factors which attract the attention of his listeners, build a ‘bridge’ and give Paul credibility in their eyes.

3. Paul makes use of the fact that there are Epicureans and Stoics in his audience. He would have been very familiar with those philosophies, for he was born and brought up in Tarsus where there was a strong Greek element and, in fact, a school which specialised in teaching Stoic philosophy. Interestingly, the piece of poetry which Paul quotes (verse 28) was from the writing of a Stoic poet. Paul knew the thinking of his hearers intimately. That made it possible for him to talk right into their attitude – and that is a very important advantage for anyone concerned with reaching out to people with the Christian message. It gives ‘street credibility’ to a message if the speaker can talk right into the listener’s mind-set.

4. Yet although Paul is concerned to build a ‘bridge’ into the minds of his hearers through politeness, through knowledge of their ways and of their thinking, in no way did he so modify the gospel as to rob it of its truth and its challenge. What he does, in fact, is to take some Epicurean and Stoic ideas, and shake them about in order to challenge them. If he cannot create faith – and he cannot –

at least he will create doubt in the minds of his hearers as to the validity of their own ideas. That is something we can, and should, always do – seek to create doubt about the validity of unbelievers’ ideas.

The Epicureans believed that the universe came into existence by a chance combination of atoms. Instead, Paul told them it was this unknown God *who made the world and everything in it* (verse 24). They believed there were many gods, who lived far away and had no interest in the world. Instead, Paul told them this unknown God is *not far from each one of us* and that their ignorance of him was because they did not seek him and reach out for him (verse 27).

The Stoics believed in the supremacy of human reason, and that being guided by human reason we can be self-sufficient and perfect. No, said Paul; up till now this God you have not known has *overlooked your ignorance, but now commands all people everywhere to repent* (verse 30). The Stoics believed that at death the soul was absorbed into God. No, no, said Paul, this God you do not know *has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this by raising him from the dead* (verse 31).

There are other ways in which Paul’s words would have produced both interest in what he said and yet also brought severe challenge to both Epicureans and Stoics. But this last statement of a physical resurrection and judgement was more than either could bear to hear. The assembly breaks up with an outburst of derision. The Epicureans believed the gods were not interested in mankind; since there was no Creator, neither was there a Governor of human affairs. The Stoics believed they were perfect and had no need either of a Saviour or a Judge. In arrogant unbelief they mocked Paul.

5. I have spent some time in looking closely at some of these points in Paul's address, because I wanted to emphasise the importance of his manner of approach. They had asked him to tell them about *the good news of Jesus and the resurrection* (verse 18). And that is exactly what he did – explaining why they needed good news and telling them of the consequences of the resurrection of Christ. The manner in which he did this is of great importance for us to notice.

He was courteous; he used arguments which were compelling by their reasonableness; he used their own confession that there was a god unknown to them and he quoted, when he could, from their own poets to support his arguments. He is not belittling them. Yet he manages to challenge their religious ideas by making clear that not to know the God of whom he spoke meant that they were necessarily ignorant. We do well to cultivate for ourselves this attitude of Paul; it is a humble attitude which springs from a love of those to whom we go, rather than a 'holier than thou' attitude of superiority, but it is not afraid to challenge illogical ideas of unbelief.

6. The Source of Paul's Courage?

There is one more significant characteristic I see in Paul, as he stands on Mars Hill. I marvel at his sheer courage. Paul is standing where Socrates stood years before, on trial for his life because he was accused of *advocating strange gods* – the very same words they were using now of Paul! (verse 18b) Socrates was murdered by being made to drink poison. Now Paul stands on that very spot. Yet he is *not* intimidated!

The court of Areopagus was the highest court in the land. Yet Paul dares to throw their self-confessed ignorance into their faces (verse 23b).

Some of the greatest temples of Greece were gathered on and around Mars Hill, yet with a sweep of his arm this little Jew declares God does not live there (verse 24). Indeed, it is foolish, he says, to think that the Divine Being can be like an image made by mere humans (verse 29); your own poets tell you so, he says.

The Greeks persuaded themselves that they were a master-race on earth, and that all other races were barbarian. Not so, says Paul, for all races have descended from the same source, the same original man, and have the same blood (verse 26).

I want to know, how can Paul evangelise so courageously? There are two parts to the answer of that question. First, he had an overwhelming personal knowledge of Christ. He had seen, on the Damascus road, something of the glory of Christ. That was a never-to-be-forgotten sight. And second, he had been so *greatly distressed* (verse 16) at the sight of a city full of idols. Some of those idols no doubt were splendid works of art; but others were hideous representations of sexual immorality. The sights tore his soul. Idols were a sick caricature of what his glorious Lord was really like.

Once having seen the glory of Christ, how could his heart endure to see such ghastly images of what the Divine Being was thought to be like? And in these two facts you have the source of his courage. The knowledge of the glory of Christ, and a consequent awareness of the hideous offensiveness of idolatry will surely cause a believer to be fearless in seeking to reach others with Christian truth.

But in the absence of those two experiences there will be little courage to challenge the unbelief which gathers around us increasingly in our western culture today.

To Sum Up

1. I suppose it can be tempting to restrict ourselves to working among those of a Christian background. With that background in place we might feel that the cause of Christianity would be more successful. The problem is that, in our day, the number of those with a Christian background in this country is sadly diminishing. It was so with Paul – the further he got away from Palestine in his journeys so the fewer people he found with an Old Testament background. Undaunted, he turned to the Gentiles. And in Athens that meant going where the people were – into the market place. The question is, Where, today, is our ‘market place’ where people are? Where do you come into closest contact with unbelievers? That is where the gospel needs to be taken.

2. The immediate consequence of taking the gospel to people who are biblically illiterate is that – apart from some unusual and sovereign activity of the Holy Spirit – the results will seem small. Evangelism in such a situation has normally got to be a long-term effort, and cannot be done in a week of special meetings. In other words, it means a continuous work of outreach by the local church, rather than an itinerating ministry by an individual, helpful though that may be to a church.

3. Quite clearly, from the example of Paul, it is important to know well those to whom you wish to take the gospel. If you are to build a ‘bridge’ into someone’s life, over which it is your prayer that the biblical message may travel, there must be a relationship between yourself and them. Otherwise there is no way you can talk credibly into their situation. Mission is best done where you are known and where you know your hearers. Again, this is a long-term ministry and chiefly involves those with

whom you are most closely acquainted and not necessarily those who live around your place of worship.

I am not saying that you should never seek to reach out to people who are strangers to you; the point I make is that going to those who are unknown to you can generally be the hardest form of mission – unless the Lord should sovereignly and suddenly ‘break into’ that situation. Paul’s cosmopolitan background equipped him excellently to do what he did on Mars Hill, because he knew how they thought. To know your contact makes it easier to talk relevantly.

4. One great difficulty which commonly affects those who have been nurtured in the Christian faith for years is that they learn, almost inevitably, to express Christian truth in ‘the language of Zion’. Paul, as we have seen, did not express the gospel in Old Testament religious patterns, because his hearers would not have known what he was talking about if he had. The truths he presented *were* thoroughly biblical truths, yet were expressed within the limits of Athenian thought-patterns. Similarly, the words we use when we speak to the biblically illiterate need to be words *they* will understand.

Now you may want to come back at me at this point, reminding me that I said earlier that words like ‘sin’ and ‘God’ and ‘gospel’ do not mean, to the biblically illiterate, what they mean to believers. So how *can* we talk to them, using words *they* will understand? Just briefly; it is axiomatic that you cannot rightly understand the ‘technical’ terms used in *any* subject, until you understand them within the *whole* framework of that subject. Bible words, like ‘sin’, ‘God’, and ‘gospel’ can only be rightly understood within the whole framework of Bible truth.

So if we want to talk meaningfully to biblically illiterate people it is vital that they have some idea of the 'big picture' – i.e. the *whole* framework of Bible truth. We are brought back again to the need for a good relationship with those to whom we would go, and to the fact that the process may well be a slow one – unless the Holy Spirit sovereignly and graciously exerts his quickening power in a remarkable way. It takes time to present the whole biblical picture, from creation to judgement, in order to convey the true meaning of biblical terms like 'sin', 'God' and 'gospel'.

But that is exactly what Paul did on Mars Hill – he went from the creation and the Creator, to the judgement and the Judge. Although Paul had been reared as a Hebrew and a Pharisee, probably knowing his Old Testament word for word, yet he takes the trouble, when in a pagan Greek city, to paint the 'big picture' of Bible truths in terms of his hearers' everyday language.

5. As well as the matter of the language we use, we must also be relevant to the actual needs of those to whom we go today. It is easy to answer questions which nobody is asking; but if you do, your irrelevance will rapidly convince the hearers that you have nothing to say to them of significance for their life today. Paul did not begin by attacking his hearers for being idolaters. Instead he seized upon their own admission that there was something they did

not know about – an unknown god. That made what Paul had to say intensely relevant to them. When you talk to the unbeliever, identify something he or she confesses not to know about; there's your opening!

One final word. Nothing I have said should be understood to mean that God cannot sovereignly use 'evangelism' which ignores all the rules that Paul has shown us, and nevertheless still reach the heart of the most biblically illiterate person. He can, and he does. Nor am I saying that if we do use the principles of communication which we find so clearly in Scripture, that God then just must bless our efforts with success. If he does, because it is his will, well and good – we give him the praise. But if he does not, because it is not his will, we must remain faithful anyway.

All I am saying is that it is our proper responsibility as faithful, if fallible, servants of God, to strive to follow those principles of biblical evangelism which are so clearly shown us throughout the Scriptures. Not to do so is to be careless of God's guidance, and that is surely a serious fault?

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