

First Contact

6. A Trip to Mars (Acts 17:16-34)

In our whistle stop tour through Acts we saw how the gospel was taken from the Jews, through Samaria to the Gentiles. We saw how the disciples had to adapt themselves to the purposes of God. An issue that really arises from what we did last week in Acts 15 was whether accepting Gentiles on what was effectively simple faith was the correct Gospel to be preaching or should they add something else. I was impressed with what Peter said at the time about placing Gentiles under Jewish law:

*Acts 15:10 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?
11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."*

The Gospel is something we should never add to or take away from. What we see in Acts is the way in which these disciples and apostles, inspired by the Holy Spirit began to take the Gospel and present it in a way that Jews or Samaritans or Greeks would understand. These are important issues for us too because in each generation we need to present the Gospel in a variety of ways and in a variety of languages so that people can understand it. Theologians have a fancy word for it; contextualisation. The Gospel is an unchanging message but how we present it does change. It's rather like potato really. A potato is a potato and it contains mostly starch - a carbohydrate. You can have potatoes as boiled, mashed, creamed, chips, saute, baked, hash browns, wedges, crisps, croquettes, roasted or whatever. We may flavour them up a bit, but you can't get away from the fact that all of them are versions of the humble spud.

But in trying to present the Gospel in two ways we can misrepresent the word of God.

- By adding to the grace that God has given to us. By saying you are saved by the grace of God but unless you do this or that your salvation may be lost. There are some groups which say this. I believe this is adding to the Word of God in the same way the Jews did in the first century and as we read in Acts 15 last week. We preach grace and then give them a burden that even our fathers could not bear.
- By watering down the Gospel to make it more palatable to people. This has been done over the years by not preaching sin and repentance. "Come to Jesus and He will make you happy. He will make you content". He will but only if you come to Him in surrender; asking His forgiveness

which He purchased for us on Calvary. Or maybe commitment will be missing. "You can own Jesus as Saviour but you can opt to own Him as Lord and accept Him that way at a later date." Rubbish! How many pulpits have I heard that one said from? Or even worse. "Come to Jesus, give sacrificially and God will pour out His blessings on you financially in this life." What a half truth! Yes, God does pour out His blessings on those who surrender all fully to Him but it's not guaranteed in this life.

As we look at the 94% of people that don't attend Church regularly and to 75% who have no connection with Church - the un-churched - how do we present the Gospel to people that **know nothing** of the things of God. They don't know who Jesus is, they know nothing of the Cross. They've never been to Sunday School. They learnt rubbish in RE lessons in School. God to them is a swear word and they don't even use that much these days as He plays such a little part in the perception of life.

That is our challenge. How do we explain the Gospel simply but truly to someone who knows nothing. Let's take a trip to Mars and see how it's done! Mars? No, not the red planet but Mars Hill in Athens as the Romans called it. The Greeks called it the Areopagus after their god of war, Ares.

A year or two has passed since the Council of Jerusalem. The Gospel is going forth amongst the Gentiles and Paul finds himself in Athens. He's now right at the heart of the world's science, philosophy and culture. Rome was the centre of government (and he got there too) but in Athens Paul was at the heart of the world system. In Athens all world thought found it's crossroads. Luke quite correctly observes that *"all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas."*

Originally the Areopagus was the seat of government but became a court where serious cases were tried. By the Roman period it still was a court but was also the places where Athenians traded ideas as real power had departed elsewhere. Athenians of high office were appointed to the Areopagus and membership of it was a position of high honour.

The two dominant groups Luke records for us were the Epicureans who believed that pleasure is the chief goal in life. Sounds familiar doesn't it? Their attitude was that if gods exist, they weren't interested in people. Their motto was "Eat, drink and be merry>" If you remember the rich fool in Luke 12 had that attitude. On the other hand the Stoics were believer sin the Greek pantheon of gods and that those gods had control over their lives. However, human reasoning was important as was self-sufficiency - sounds familiar too doesn't it? Right at the base of our thinking in society is Greek philosophy. We think we are influenced by 2000 years of Christianity but we find that Greek philosophy is the foundation of our society as it was of Roman. Even by the second century, senior figures in the early Church were concerned at the "Hellenisation" of the faith to the point where serious errors and sects were entering the Church and polluting the Gospel. As I've said recently in the morning sermons; we are called in the power of God to change

the world, but so often the world changes us and imposes its values and pollutes the Gospel.

But on the other hand the Areopagus was a place of controversy. Certain of the Greek philosophers we now regard as most influential in our societies were not in accord with the Greek pantheism - they believed that their study of the world led them to only a single omnipotent God. Amongst those were Plato, Aristotle and Socrates. Socrates was condemned to death on the Areopagus for believing and defending his belief there was one God. Someone has suggested that Paul stood in the same spot and proclaimed Him.

Many Greeks found the logic of one God a reasonable one and that's probably why they were so fascinated by Judaism and why they attended their synagogues. By the time Paul and co. were proclaiming the Gospel, the Holy Spirit had already laid the foundations. Christianity was logical and sensible and made sense. Let's always remember that the Holy Spirit is the One who converts people. He lays the foundations, He brings people in contact with the people of God and the message of the Gospel and He convinces men and women. Our job is to walk with the Spirit and keep in step with the Spirit (scripture!!) and we will serve the purposes in sharing the Good news and in bringing forth revival in our land at a time like this.

Which brings us back to Paul. How did he deal with this situation? He's in Athens, so why not preach the Gospel?

Verse 16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 So 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.

Back to normal practice - he started in the synagogue and moved outwards to the marketplace. He causes a stir amongst the Athenian philosophers:

18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

They were all confused because his message was foreign to them. Paul gave a fairly standard sermon but they thought he was talking about two gods Jesus and Anastasis (thinking that the resurrection was the name of a god). They were confused. Does the Gospel make sense to you. I hope it does but be sure that it is gobbledygook to many non-Christians. They have no understanding. That's why we did Sharing Jesus because it's designed to help people who know very little to understand what is a very simple Gospel. It's simple to us but an impenetrable barrier to most people. Let's remember that as we try to share it with the people of Norfolk.

So Paul ends up in the Areopagus and is invited to share his message with them. What follows is a presentation that is superbly sound (Paul always is!) but breaks all the rules of good evangelism that maybe some of us were taught! It's 100% truth and 0% Scripture. The Bible isn't mentioned. Oh! I hear you gasp! Why? Because the Bible meant nothing to them, so why quote it.

Paul was also facing another problem, his message was "foreign" and the Greeks were a bit xenophobic. What follows is a classic presentation which we would do well to heed if we want to reach those who are lost and un-churched.

- ▶▶ he didn't condemn them out of hand
- ▶▶ he started where they were already
- ▶▶ he used their customs and characteristics to present the Gospel.
- ▶▶ he didn't water down just to keep them on board

● He didn't condemn them out of hand

He was distressed by their idolatry. What would they have done if he just turned around and said "You bunch of evil idolaters, trust in Jesus or you'll find yourself in eternal hell!" Theologically correct but they would have been incensed that their religious system was being condemned. The lights would instantly be extinguished and the shutters closed. So he starts by saying something nice.

Verse 22 Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.

That's respect, that's a compliment. You'll find that works with almost anybody. Show them respect even if you don't agree with an ounce of what they believe. Respect isn't agreement. But respect is the first sign that you love them as God loves them. It's the essential root in all evangelism to Muslims and Jews. Credit them with what they are - they will often be more religious and morally upright (in their terms) than you are.

For non Christians, recognise those things which are creditable in their lives - for most decent law-abiding people in Swaffham have much creditable about them in worldly terms, even though you know it doesn't wash with God. Make friends because a friend will accept what inevitably are tough questions about their lives.

● He started where they were already

He found something about them and their beliefs that were a start point.

Verse 23 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.

He found that they had an altar to an unknown god. This wasn't just a random thing. When we are witnessing to somebody, we need to know what they believe, however ridiculous it is because we can pick up something somewhere that will lead us into the Gospel. Before we ever arrive, God has already begun a work of grace in their lives. Let's discern it and latch on to it.

In this case Paul seems to be referring to an event that occurred in the 6th century BC when Athens suffered a severe plague. They tried to appease all their gods but to no avail. An oracle indicated that they needed to appease an unknown god. They called on Epimenedes from Knossos in Crete to help. He obtained a flock of black and white sheep and released them on Mars Hill, instructing the people to mark the places where any of them lay down at the beginning of their grazing period. When a number of sheep rested, the Athenians offered them in sacrifice upon unnamed altars built for this purpose, and the plague lifted from the city.

Therefore Mars Hill, Epimenedes were all part of the culture of the city and Paul uses part of their own culture to introduce the true God of creation. Clever stuff. Did you know that when witnessing to anyone, there's always something there? You are rarely ever the first encounter with the things of God that they have experienced, however strange that encounter may seem. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you into spotting the right thing. For us as a Church we need to present the Gospel in a way that communicates truth in the context of what people understand. We know what Paul then said communicates the Gospel but by mentioning Epimenedes, he had the people's attention.

● He used their customs and characteristics to present the Gospel.

But it didn't stop at that. Because the "unknown god" was powerful according to the Athenians, he follows this by saying:

Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. 24 "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. 25 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. 26 From one man 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. 27 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. 28 `For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, `We are his offspring.'

He describes who God is and His desires. He describes how He is different from their idols. This is all scriptural and we'd have no problem finding a reference for it in the Bible. But to them the Bible was no authority so he alludes to truth rather than quotes from it. Paul then uses a piece of their

culture to back up what he says about God. He uses Epimenides again and another Cretan, Aratus to back up what he is saying. He uses authorities **they** recognise rather than what he would recognise.

This tells us two things about Paul. First he was a learned man and he'd taken the time to research their culture and beliefs so he had an answer for them. How often do we take time out to understand the culture and beliefs of the non-Christian people we come across. Too often Christians stand in judgement over non-Christians and say how terrible their lifestyle is. Paul did not agree with an ounce of pagan philosophy but he knew enough to use it to communicate. In fact these two Cretans were so unusual to quote that it would suggest that he didn't just use them as a tool in evangelism, but that he was significantly learned in them. He's read their stuff out of his own interest.

Secondly, he did not see anything as unclean and un-useable to the Holy Spirit. He quotes two pagans to support what he says God is like. We are often so slow in using the music and culture of our society to communicate the Gospel. Yet there is so much in our society that can help us communicate, be it music, literature, technology or whatever. Remember, that every piece of material the Holy Spirit has to use in this world is fallen anyway.

I always found it an irony that the leaders in my church in my youth were reluctant to allow bands playing the popular music of the 60s into our church but were happy to allow in Sankey hymns which were based on the music hall tunes of the nineteenth century!

Those reaching Muslims will tell you that a good place to start is to remind them that Jesus (Isa) appears in the Koran and is respected as a prophet. Have they ever thought of what Isa said in His own words? And then present the Gospel. More flies are caught with honey than with a rolled up newspaper!

Let's never be afraid to engage the culture of the society around us in order to present Christ. We have come from a generation that created it's own Church culture and we used it to keep out all comers.

● He didn't water down the Gospel just to keep them on board

29 "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. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 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." 32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." 33 At that, Paul left the Council. 34 A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

In the end, there is a limit to how far one can go. Paul uses their culture and experiences to open a channel of communication but in the end He has to proclaim the truth and does.

Now listen carefully what I am going to say next because this point is essential in evangelism but an easy one to misunderstand.

I said earlier that we should not condemn them. True because without Christ we would be under the same condemnation. They are going where, but for the grace of God we would be going too. What devalues much Gospel preaching is that **we** condemn people. **We** inform them they have sinned and are list. They then look at us and say "you hypocrite". Try condemning a Muslim - they will give you that reply because they are far more religious (in their terms) than you will ever be.

I don't condemn, you don't condemn. Judgement is not a gift of the Holy Spirit, neither is the authority to judge men here and now.

But we must never go short on what God says. **He is the judge** and he has said that ALL have sinned and come short of His glory.

You don't condemn but you make it clear that all stand condemned already in God's eyes. All have sinned and come short of God's glory - that's the Word of God! Also the bit about the message that they can be justified freely by His grace!

That's what Paul presents here. Remember that. It will change how you perceive people. Someone said sharing the gospel is like one beggar telling another where to find bread. It's true. Always present the Gospel as something that God is saying and doing.

Now they know the difference between the living God and their idolatry he calls on them to repent. He brings in judgement and resurrection. That was it. There was the division - some sneered, some deferred and some believed.

First Contact has been about how we face new people in new ways with the Gospel. We looked at it because I believe that as we move into our community with the Gospel, that we need to face new people in new ways. The Gospel is unchanging but we must change the serving suggestion. We may find this difficult to fathom. All we do know as Reginaldo Krukliis said, we don't see anything different by doing the same thing. However good what we used to do was, it doesn't work any more and we need to move on and walk where the Holy Spirit is walking and what is in the purposes of God. It won't be easy, because in the first century it wasn't either.

But that doesn't mean we don't do it. We are looking forward to an Autumn of new things - a Holiday Club, Alpha and the rest. Let's start to embrace our future and give God the glory.



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