



(Gathering in Malawi, Scott Girvan)

MISSION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

This is an excerpt from an essay written by Susan Campbell, reflecting on what issues Acts 17:16-34 raises for the practice and theology of mission today. The full text of the article, including references, can be accessed at www.globalinteraction.org.au/Resources.aspx

Paul's speech, recorded by Luke in Acts 17, is one of three major missionary speeches, and the only one addressed to pagans. The events that surround his famous speech and the words themselves are "the most outstanding example of intercultural evangelistic witness in the New Testament."¹ Paul has been regarded by scholars as a masterful mission practitioner and in this text we see him at the height of his powers as a communicator, preaching the gospel with creativity and skill.

Through reflection on this text, Christians are invited to discover paradigms that might inform, guide, and suggest parameters for the ongoing task of enabling the gospel to come to life in new settings. What issues does Acts 17:16-34 raise for the practice and theology of mission?

1. Settings for mission

Paul may have never intended, nor included in his missionary strategy, to preach in Athens as he was simply waiting there for Timothy and Silas (v16). Yet Paul did not view this waiting period as 'down time' and he took every available opportunity to share the gospel. This is a challenge for Western Christians in our segmented and compartmentalised lives.

Mission should not end when we come home from an ESL lesson, unpack from summer beach mission or fly to Australia for home assignment.

While Paul spent time teaching in the synagogue, the most significant time was spent in the marketplace and at the Areopagus. Paul was out there on their turf, engaging with those on the margins or outside the synagogue. He displayed skill and diversity by his interactions with various groups including religious people (v17), onlookers and bystanders (v17) and sophisticated, elite philosophers (v19).

Paul's model invites Christians to move and minister among non-Christians in the commercial, scholarly and public environments. In addition to traditional mission settings, we require people who can gossip the gospel in informal settings, debate with intellectuals and express truth creatively among artists.

2. Observation

Paul begins his speech describing his city walk and observations (v23). "He did not just 'notice' the idols. He looked and looked, and thought and thought, until the fires of holy indignation were kindled within him."² Paul's most significant skill was making considered observations of the city then reflecting on the implications for Athenian spirituality. The order of Paul's actions is important: He saw, he felt, he spoke.

Paul's model is critical for mission today. People do not appreciate the arrogance of missionaries who keenly arrive with words, sermons and doctrine, but who fail to spend considerable time watching, listening and learning. "We must study [others'] religion – preferably by reading their own writers, by observing their practices, and by talking to their adherents."³ Christians require training on how to: watch effectively; listen deeply; question thoroughly; notice cultural cues and refrain from bestowing lengthy, inappropriate responses. Also required is education for supporting churches that enables cross-cultural workers to feel freedom to incorporate years of cultural learning without pressure for fast 'results'.

3. Responding from within

As Paul observed the city, he was deeply distressed to see the city submerged in idols (v16). "Deeply" translates the Greek phrase that means "his spirit within him" and refers to his inner spiritual life. He was moved in his being and stirred by the Spirit within him.

Paul responded without irrational anger or temper, but rather with a continuous, settled reaction. His feeling remained internal and he did not disclose it to the philosophers. Paul displayed courtesy for the sake of sensitive communication.

Similarly today, Christians should pay attention to the movements of the Spirit within them. A major reason why the church slumbers peacefully on while its people are deaf to Christ's commission and tongue-tied in testimony is that we do not feel as Paul felt. The Spirit has not stopped stirring, however we have not been still, alert or in-tune enough to pay attention.

4. A jealous God

Paul's distress is birthed from the conflict that arises with Jewish beliefs and Old Testament teaching regarding idols and images detracting attention from the one true God. The distress Paul felt "aroused within him deep stirrings of jealousy for the Name of God." (Stott, 1990, p.279)

Jealousy for God no longer carries such weight as motivation. It is instead a deterrent. In the Western, post-modern context where any claim to exclusive truth is shunned, Christians "deny finality and uniqueness of Jesus Christ and [thus] reject the very concept of evangelising."² Reclaiming zeal and jealousy for the name of Jesus as the greatest incentive is an increasingly challenging task.

5. Strategic communication

Scholars have praised Paul's address to the Athenians as strategically remarkable. Paul chose Stoic principles and quoted Greek writers as a point of entry and to "guarantee attention and a sympathetic hearing."⁴ He specifically addressed the listeners' claims, reassuring them that he was not introducing new deities. His speech followed the established format with which the hearers would be familiar. His terms, convictions, arguments, formulations and cultural language were understood and acknowledged as valid.

In this address "Paul is at his rhetorical best, drawing upon whatever persuasive tools are in his kit in order to engage the Athenian worldview and culture."¹ Therefore, it is not a summary of Paul's sermons, but a speech for a specific context.

There is no 'one size fits all' approach to sharing the gospel in different cultures. The message that is proclaimed, through word and/or deed, must be accessible and intelligible to the hearers. It needs to 'scratch where they itch' by responding to felt needs, addressing questions that are asked and dealing with relevant issues.

6. Comprehensive message

It is clear from the content of the speech that Paul addresses the audience "at the level of their basic worldview assumptions, creating a necessary context and foundation for proclaiming the risen Christ."¹ He does not assume familiarity with the Old Testament and bases his arguments on general revelation and extra-scriptural evidence rather than Christological assertions. Paul proclaims God as creator, sustainer, ruler, father and judge, thus grounding his Christology in theology. This perspective is comprehensive, wholistic and lays solid groundwork.

7. Embracing culture

The point of greatest discussion about this text is the way Paul began by affirming his audience and inducing their positive impression. He respectfully begins: "Men of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious." (v22) They are addressed "as religious people in a religious idiom about religious matters in anticipation of a religious response."⁵ This affirmation created an environment conducive to further dialogue. Paul did not overtly condemn or dismiss the audience, but "wilfully engages the religious world and convictions of the other... and engages the deeper aspect of belief that was already in place."⁶ He meets them where they are at.

The altar to the unknown God (v23) is used as a rhetorical bridge to the main subject of his address. He recognises the reality of the Athenians' spirituality and uses the altar to highlight the potential of a more genuine relationship with God. Motivated by fear of offending an anonymous deity, the altar was most likely a safety precaution. Legend tells that during a plague, Epimenides of Crete counselled the Athenians to send a flock of sheep on the Areopagus and erect altars to unnamed gods where the sheep stopped. It is unknown whether Paul knew of this story, but if he did, modern missiologists would recognise this as a

redemptive analogy – a story embedded within a culture and used to demonstrate biblical truth.

Paul's approach is an example of contextualisation: "the dynamic and comprehensive process by which the gospel is incarnated within a concrete historical or cultural situation."¹ **It is the responsibility and privilege of Christians to exegete the context, discern what is appropriate, discover points of connection, take the spirituality of the people seriously and communicate with the least-possible barriers to understanding.** A contextual approach is not only important for sharing the gospel, but also for how the gospel is 'worked out.' It is the Christian's role to step back, pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance and empower the recipients to live out the gospel in obedience to Christ within their own cultures and circumstances. It is widely acknowledged that a contextual approach to mission is a respectful, honest and creative method of mission.

8. Challenging culture

Due to the fact that the gospel does not exist in one language group or cultural system, it will never sit neatly in any group without provoking change and transformation. **"The gospel, in some ways, is countercultural to every culture."**¹ While Paul acknowledges the Athenians' search for God, he implies that their search has been unsuccessful or incomplete (v23).

It is no surprise that the monotheistic-soaked message was not entirely palatable to the listeners' ears. In Athens, the temples made the city famous, sacrifices ensured goodwill of gods and participation in the cults led to higher social status. Thus, some sneered and others were hesitant and cautious. Acknowledging the divine kingship of Jesus "inevitably led to direct conflict of the early church with the pluralism and relativism of the Greco-Roman world."⁷

During the process of Kingdom transformation, the gospel offends, challenges and confronts. Despite the inevitable disruption it will cause, we must avoid 'watering down' the gospel to make it more palatable. The task of mission in every culture is to carefully discern both the essential elements of the gospel that can not be shaken, as well as the unnecessary elements that can be negotiated or modified.

A common attitude hindering this process is fear of affirming aspects of another's faith and extreme caution not to 'go too far'. The terror of syncretism paralyses people into not going far enough. Instead, people avoid interacting in spheres that engage the non-Christian mind. For many, contextual mission is confronting and risky. **Paul displayed an uncommon degree of courage to speak as he spoke, which encourages us to have courage, commitment and an unwavering reliance on the Holy Spirit to be our guide.**

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¹Flemming, Dean. *Contextualisation in the New Testament: Patterns for theology and mission*. England: Apollos, 2005, p.72-77

²Stott, John R. W. *The Message of Acts*. England: Intervarsity Press, 1990, p.291

³Fernando, Ajith. *Acts: The NIV Application Commentary*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998. p.479

⁴Kee, Howard Clark. *The Theology of Acts*. London: SCM Press, 1990, p.65

⁵Robinson, Anthony B. and Robert W. Wall. *Called to be Church: The books of Acts for a new day*. Grand Rapids Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006, p.216

⁶Mbuvu, Andrew M. 'Missionary acts, things fall apart: Modelling mission in Acts 17:15-34 and a concern for dialogue in Chinua Achebe's Things fall apart'. *Ex auditu* 23 (2007) 140-156.

⁷Peterson, David. 'The Worship of the New Community.' In *Witness to the Gospel: the theology of Acts*. Eds. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998, p.384