

# Mission Ready, week 1:



# Learning from Paul in Athens

# Paul in Athens (Acts 17.16-34)



- Athens

- *the proud, intellectual capital of the Roman Empire,*
- *the home of democracy, famed for philosophy, art and literature,*
- *already full of “tourist attractions” by Paul’s day*

- Paul

- *Driven from Berea for preaching Christ (v13)*
- *Unknown in Athens – as was Christ*
- *“It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known ...” (Romans 15.20)*

# Paul in Athens (Acts 17.16–34)



- Paul preaches the gospel to the Athenians:
  - *His motive – why does he preach?*
  - *His message – what does he preach?*
  - *His manner – who is he preaching to?*
  - *His means – how does he preach?*

# Paul's motive: the "why"



- Why does he preach Christ?
  - *There are a number of right motives to preach Christ:*
    - *Jesus commands it: "go and make disciples of all nations ..." (Mat 28.19)*
    - *"Christ's love compels us ..." (2 Corinthians 5.14)*
    - *"Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men." (2 Corinthians 5.11)*
  - *Here, Luke identifies another in Paul:*
    - *"Paul ... was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned ... [disputed] ... [advocated] ... [preached] ... [presented] ..." (17.16-19)*

# Paul's motive: the "why"



- “Hallowed be your name”
  - *Are we “greatly distressed” by idolatry – that God’s name is not regarded as holy?*
  - *Athens thought of itself as the centre of wisdom.*
  - *In reality, “although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images ...”*  
*(Romans 1.22-23)*
  - *For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world.” (1 Jn. 2:15-16 NIBO)*

# Paul's message: the “what”



- “Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.” (17.18)
  - *In other words, the same message as everywhere in Acts:*
    - *Peter at Pentecost: “God has raised this Jesus to life ...” (2.32)*
    - *Paul in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch: “We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus.” (13.32-33)*
    - *“There is one Gospel where hope is found / The empty tomb still speaks”*

# Paul's message: the "what"



- Christ's resurrection grounds the need for decision:
  - *"In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 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."* (Acts 17.30-31)
- In general terms, Paul is always concerned to "declare unto you all the counsel of God." (20.27, AV)
  - *The gospel is the message of the whole Bible; the message of the whole Bible is the gospel.*

# Paul's manner: the "who"

- Although the gospel message never changes, every person with whom we share it is different.
  - *"To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. ... To those not having the law I became like one not having the law ... so as to win those not having the law. ... I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."* (1C 9.20f)
- The temptation: adapt the gospel to the culture while remaining inflexible on the packaging.





# Paul's manner: the "who"



- Paul's manner varies according to context:
  - *In the synagogue, he reasons from the Scriptures because the Jews already accept their authority (eg 13.16ff in Pisidian Antioch).*
  - *In non-Jewish contexts, he has to build the biblical world-view, beginning with creation (as here in Acts 17), eg:*
    - *“We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them.” (Acts 14.15, in Lystra)*

# Paul's means: the "how"



- Paul's preaching is *not* just "preaching" (v17-20):
  - *"he reasoned in the synagogue ... as well as in the market-place ... A group of ... philosophers began to **dispute** with him. Some of them **asked** ... "He seems to be **advocating** foreign gods." ... Paul was **preaching** ... you are **presenting** ... you are **bringing** some strange ideas ... we want to know what they mean."*
  - *A variety of contexts: synagogue and market-place*
  - *A variety of approaches: proclamation (preaching, presenting) and dialogue (disputing, asking)*

# Paul's means: the “how”



- “A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him.” (Acts 17.18)
  - *Stoics: destiny and fate determine all (Lt. Dan in Forrest Gump)*
    - *God is distant and unconcerned.*
  - *Epicureans: luck and chance determine all (“Life is like a box of chocolates” – Forrest’s mother)*
    - *God is powerless and disinterested.*
    - *Epicureans believed Darwinian evolution millennia before Darwin!*

“I don’t know if Mama’s right or if its Lieutenant Dan, I don’t know if we each have a destiny or if we’re all floating around accidental, like on a breeze. But I think maybe its both, maybe both is happening at the same time.”



# Paul's means: the “how”



- So how will Paul share “Jesus and the resurrection” – that is “the whole counsel of God” – with them?
  - *He starts from within their own belief system.*
  - *He identifies their ignorance from within their own religion:*
    - *“I ... found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD” (v23)*
    - *He knows and quotes their own poets (v28)*
    - *Do we know what the person we are sharing Jesus with believes? How might we do this? Question Time!*

# Paul's means: the “how”



- *He establishes the biblical framework from creation to judgement:*
  - *God is not served by us (v25) and therefore defined and contained by us (v29): Paul confronts the universal view of idolaters.*
    - *What a wonderful point to go to the heart of the gospel and proclaim that the Son of Man came “to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10.45)*
  - *The Epicureans are wrong – it is not chance, but the gracious life-giving God who creates and sustains us, determining our existence.*
    - *In their view, there is no room for judgement*
  - *The Stoics are wrong – God is not distant, but “not far from each one of us”; indeed, “we are his offspring”.*
    - *In their view, there is no room for grace.*

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