

Paul's Evangelism In Acts 17

In several places, Luke recorded that Paul persuaded or convinced people concerning the gospel. For instance, in Acts 18:4, Luke recorded of Paul: "And he reasoned in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks." (Acts 18:4). Similarly, in Acts 17:4, with reference to his sermon on Mars Hill, Luke recorded that Paul successfully persuaded some: "And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few." (Acts 17:4). The Greek term translated in Acts 17:4 as "believed" is not *pisteuo*, but is a form of the same word translated "persuaded" in Acts 18:4. In other words, what Luke recorded in Acts 17:4 was that some people were convinced or persuaded by Paul's words. And again, we read of Paul preaching in Rome: "And when they had appointed him a day, there came many to him into his lodging; to whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening. And some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not." (Acts 28:23-24). According to Luke, Paul was "persuading [convincing, *peitho*] them concerning Jesus" and "some believed [were convinced, *peitho*]" but others "believed [*pisteuo*] not." Since Paul persuaded or convinced people as part of his evangelistic approach, there is value in studying Paul's approach to the Gentiles in Athens in his famous Mars Hill sermon and, in particular, to consider how Paul attempted to persuade them concerning Jesus Christ.

Central to Paul's evangelistic approach was that he tailored his presentation to his audience. We see, for example, that when he preached in a Jewish synagogue in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13, he assumed their knowledge of the God of the Old Testament and certain historical events recorded therein. As Gangel notes, Paul covered some 450 years of history quite quickly because there was "[n]o need to elaborate these points; synagogue worshipers would have know all the particulars."¹ Paul tried to convince his audience in Antioch that Jesus was the Messiah who fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. There was no need for him to try to convince his audience of monotheism, nor that the existent god was the God of the Old Testament scriptures, nor of Israel's history recorded therein. But what was persuasive for the Jewish audience in Pisidian Antioch would not necessarily have been persuasive to a Gentile audience in Athens.

Paul had a studied understanding of his Athenian Gentile audience and drew from their culture to take advantage of an open opportunity to dialogue with them at Mars Hill. For one, Pauls' speech quoted from the Greek poet Epimenides (ca. 600 B.C.) in verse 28 ("For in him we live, and move, and have our being.") and from the Stoic philosopher Aratus (315 - 240 B.C.) in the same verse ("For we are also his offspring").² Paul was dealing with a very intellectual and educated audience, that included Epicureans and Stoics, and his approach was on the philosophical level that

¹ Kenneth O. Gangel, *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers 1998), 214.

² Clinton E. Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2002), 155.

they would expect. According to Polhill, Paul “was attempting to build what bridges he could to reach the Athenian intellectuals.”³ It is important to recognize that Paul’s reference to Epimenides was quite deliberate, especially in view of where Paul physically was located as he delivered his speech.

Epimenides was a real person, but his life had become the stuff of legend by the time Paul preached on Mars Hill. He was considered a prophet. We can piece together a sort of composite biographical sketch that Paul’s audience believed about Epimenides, or at least what they would have heard or read about him, from the writings of Plutarch, Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, and from what was recorded later much later by Diogenes Laertius.⁴ In short, Epimenides left his father’s home and took a nap in a cave, waking up 57 years later.⁵ He gained a reputation as having received special favor from the gods.⁶ When Athens was suffering from a plague, a priestess at Delphi told them to purify the city.⁷ The citizens sent for Epimenides to do the purification and when he arrived, he took some black sheep and white sheep

³ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary: Acts* (Nashville: Broadman Press 1992), 370.

⁴ Most of these writings are available on multiple websites online. For instance, Diogenes Laertius’ works are available at <http://fxylib.znufe.edu.cn/wgfljd/%B9%C5%B5%E4%D0%DE%B4%C7%D1%A7/pw/diogenes/index.htm>. The information is summarized in Don Richardson’s book, *infra* note 5.

⁵ Don Richardson, *Eternity In Their Hearts* (Ventura: Regal 2005), 9-23.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

to Mars' Hill and allowed them to graze.⁸ He instructed some men to follow the sheep, and wherever they would lay down, they were to sacrifice the sheep on that spot to whatever god was patron over that spot.⁹ So they did and the plague was lifted, but no one knew who the god was that accepted the sheep offerings and lifted the plague.¹⁰ Thus, the Athenians made an altar to the unknown god.¹¹

When Paul quoted Epimenides and referenced the “unknown god” altar, he was calling to their mind all of the legend about Epimenides as he proclaimed that the one they worshiped in ignorance was the one he was there to explain to them. Paul then stated a number of basic teachings about God that made sense in view of his polytheistic (and superstitious), idol-worshipping audience, but would not have been necessary for the audience at a Jewish synagogue: there is one God, He created everything, is sovereign, does not dwell in man-made temples, is not worshiped by men's hands, is the sustainer of all life, created one race, determined the seasons (“the times before appointed”), and set national boundaries. After arguing for monotheism, and in particular, the God of the Old Testament, Paul preached Jesus, his resurrection, and the coming judgment.

We can make modern, real-world applications from Paul's Mars Hill approach. First, we need to conduct purposeful, detailed study of our primary audience. Such information as cultural taboos, preferences, religions and history

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

may provide valuable guidance to our evangelistic approach, and in some cases, as with the Athenians, may reveal a cultural backdrop that helps the audience to understand the context for the gospel. As one example, I recently had the opportunity to talk at length with a missionary to Papua, New Guinea. He related to me a cultural concept in the village where he ministers that provided a springboard for the gospel. In that culture, if all of a family's sons die, another family may give them one of theirs. It is essentially an adoption that ensures the continuation of the family and the care of the parents as they age. The inherent notion in this practice is that of giving up a son to "save" another family, and for the people in this village it made the gospel understandable.

It is also important that we not assume too much. Paul knew his Mars Hill audience was polytheistic and did not have a concept of one God over everything, and for that reason Paul argued for monotheism. Most of the Bible assumes God's existence, but in the United States today we are increasingly facing a culture of skepticism and relativism largely influenced by the so-called new atheism as well as other philosophies like Darwinism. Accordingly, our gospel approach in many instances will have to begin with an argument that God exists and created everything, and then move to the implications of God's existence and creation of people. It puts the cart before the horse to quote the Bible as the revelation of God to a person that rejects God's existence.

We should also note that Paul did not lace his speech with Christian lingo. Perhaps too often, Christians fall into the habit of using terms that have very technical meanings within certain Christian circles but are confusing to other

people. For instance, terms like saved and lost do not have the same meaning in secular circles as within many Christian circles. These words are Biblical, but they are potentially confusing if they are not carefully explained. Paul's speech to the Athenians avoids technical verbiage and instead, Paul articulated a message his audience could easily understand.

Finally, while Paul's approach to the Athenians was substantially different than his approach in the Jewish synagogues, the gospel message itself was not compromised. After using the "unknown god" altar as a springboard and arguing for monotheism, Paul presented the reality of Jesus, his resurrection, and the future judgment. So also, while our approach can and should be tailored to the audience, it should always have the goal of bringing people to the cross of Jesus Christ.

Paul's sermon on Mars Hill is instructive on several levels. I believe it provides our best model in the New Testament for evangelizing people that have zero Bible background, an increasingly common reality in the United States today. From Paul's sermon, we have a model that includes deliberate preparation for the particular audience in view, a foundational context for the gospel, language that would be easily understood by the audience, and it was all directed toward bringing people to the cross.