

## Mission to the contemporary world: Lessons from Acts 17

Acts 17:16-34

Read end of verse 18: Paul...

*The key to mission is Jesus and the resurrection* – that's what I want us to see from this passage

First I'd like us to see the cultural context in Athens and how close it is to our context now – this is very relevant.

Then I'd like us to see how Paul engages with that culture – in a way that is a brilliant model of mission.

Then I'd like us to see the reactions to that mission.

First – the cultural context – verses 16-21.

Athens was a city full of 1) idols; 2) God-fearers; 3) Epicureans; 4) Stoics; 5) social media.

“City was full of idols – literally had a shrine or statue on every corner of the street. What do we have at the corner of every street in Nairobi?

ATM, M-Pesa point, shop, advert, news stand, political discussion, prostitute

Are those our idols? The Bible says an idol is a created thing which is treated as God. It's a good thing that has become a god-thing. It's where we have gone from worshipping the Creator and taking refuge in him to worshipping something in his creation and taking refuge in that. Could be money, plots. It could be family. It could be Facebook.

And there are also God-fearers in Athens. Verse 17a\_\_\_\_\_ We can easily forget them because Athens is famous for Paul's speech to the pagans but there were God-fearing Jews and Gentiles in Athens. We can forget that in our very secular society there are also God-fearers. Not everyone is reading Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. Not everyone is a hip and trendy liberal. There are millions of conservative, religious, moral people going to 'churches' of some description every Sunday.

Then there are the Epicureans. Their slogan is – let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die. They are materialists – there's nothing beyond what we can see and touch – if there is a God then he doesn't get involved with our lives – there's definitely nothing after death. So Seize the Day. The point of life is to be happy – not in a completely hedonistic way but a measured sort of happiness – tranquillity, peace, no worries, no pain. The Epicurean would have aimed for the middle class Kenyan Dream. Nice house, nice car, nice family, nice food, living the good life, no problems.

Then there are the Stoics. For them the problem is that we desire what we can't have and we get upset about what we can't change. Similar to Buddhism. We should focus on changing our attitude and lowering our expectations. The Stoics are similar to the Epicureans in that they don't think there's anything beyond the material universe and they focus on this life and living the good life now but unlike the Epicureans they say, Don't pursue happiness directly, don't desire happiness, instead focus on doing the right thing – and the right thing isn't something revealed by God it is fitting in

with society and going with the flow of nature – a bit like Chinese Taoism or modern humanism. The Stoics today would probably be extremely concerned about working towards a better society.

Then you've got this wonderful cultural summary in verse 21\_\_\_\_\_

Doesn't that perfectly sum up our social media world? It's checking your phone for the new political comments, the top stories, what's trending. That's what the Athenians were doing – Tweeting, Facebooking, reposting, sharing.

Isn't this so relevant? And what is missing from all of this? Jesus and the Resurrection. Whether it's the Epicureans or the Stoics or the God-fearers – they don't have Jesus – you read their tweets and timelines and there is nothing about Jesus and definitely nothing about the resurrection – it is just about me and this life.

So when Paul starts talking about Jesus and the resurrection – they say – this is New! We've never heard of anything like this. Increasingly that's what the West and even East Africa is like – many people have heard nothing of Jesus and even less of the resurrection.

So what should our response be if we are believers?

- 1) Greatly troubled – v16\_\_\_\_\_ Very interesting. Paul wasn't going round the great city of Athens taking selfies or enjoying a coffee and soaking in the atmosphere. He was getting more and more distressed. Thing is that Athens was a nice city – beautiful city – with nice people, religious people, intelligent people, nice middle class Epicureans, good serious-minded Stoics. But Paul is greatly saddened and angered... by the idolatry – not by poverty or by injustice – those things should make us sad and angry – but it was the idolatry that grieved him – are we grieved and troubled when we look at a nice, prosperous city which is full of people taking refuge in idols? A few months ago in Nairobi a 6-storey block of flats collapsed in heavy rains because it was built badly, illegally, corruptly. Lot of people died. Probably many buildings like that which could collapse next time there is flooding. Makes me sad and angry. But idols are like badly built tower blocks that people take refuge in; they are death traps, waiting to fall. I should be deeply troubled when I see a whole city full of people living in death traps. That is the emotional force behind Paul's mission.
- 2) Get the Bible open with God-fearers – v17a\_\_\_\_\_ - 'reasoned' = same word as in v2\_\_\_\_\_ - Paul always goes first for the synagogue and the people who know something of the Scriptures and he opens the Bible with them and he reasons with them – he says – look, do you see what it says here about the Messiah, do you see what it says about him dying and rising from the dead? There's a great video on YouTube called '[The Forbidden Chapter in the Hebrew Bible](#)' – and it has a Jewish Christian going around Jerusalem talking to other Jews and just opening Isaiah 53 with them and saying what does it say? Who do you think it's talking about? It's brilliant. I think that is exactly what Paul was doing.
- 3) Get into the market place – v17b\_\_\_\_\_ - Paul didn't wait for people to come to church – he went to them where they were – [Where are people talking about serious issues?] and what did he talk about? V18\_\_\_\_\_ - The Greek word for Resurrection is Anastasia – he was talking about Jesus and Anastasia so much people overhearing thought he was talking about two new gods. Notice – Paul doesn't come in with lots of clever philosophy to shoot down their clever philosophy. He comes in with Jesus, Jesus, Jesus – the foolish sounding message of a crucified and risen man.

And the following verses – 22-31 – give us an example of how he preached Jesus and the resurrection to pagans.

So this is a non-Christian context almost exactly the same as ours and we're given an example of how Paul engages with that culture.

Verse 22 \_\_\_\_\_ said" – notice he engages by speaking – not by art or dance or picking up litter – good as all those things are – he's only going to be able to communicate the gospel by speaking.

What does he speak about – basically 0, 1, 2, 3

- Zero they start from
- One true God
- Two men
- Three days

Zero they start from – the zero knowledge and zero hope they have – verse 22-23 \_\_\_\_\_

Sometimes people say that Paul is building on what they know – but really this is about what they *don't* know – that's the point – it is the altar to the UNKNOWN God – they don't know him – in building this altar they are admitting their ignorance, they are confessing their confusion and hopelessness.

As he continues his speech Paul brings out the things they have got wrong about God – he is not anything like you thought, he's not like any of your idols. When he talks of them in verse 27 – 'reaching out' or 'feeling around for' – it's the word for blind men groping about in the dark – picture of hopelessness. And he finishes in verse 30 by talking about their 'ignorance' and that they need to Repent – that is a complete change of mind – a 180 degree turn around – you're going the wrong way down the motorway and you need to do a U-turn.

So Paul's approach is not to move people from known to unknown – it is to move people from unknown (from zero) to something completely different. He is not a motivational speaker saying – you're great, you can do it. He is saying your starting point is powerless and blind – but there is one who can open eyes and raise the dead.

Brings us to One – One true and living God – verse 24-25. He says, you've got God completely wrong.

Greek mythology – lots of gods involved in creation – fighting, having affairs, creating different bits, mayhem. Paul says – No – there was one God who made the heavens and the earth.

We don't serve him; he serves us. He doesn't live in houses we make; we live in him –

Verse 28 \_\_\_\_\_ He's pointing out the contradictions in their own philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Even your own poets and philosophers sometimes admit that God must be our creator and yet in your religious practice you reverse that and make God in your own image. V29 \_\_\_\_\_

One of the things we tell the apprentices at iServe Africa is, "Don't think it is obvious who God is. Don't assume that when someone says, "God" they mean the same as you or the same as the Bible. What the one true God is like is not obvious. Most people think he is like the god who turned up in a Simpsons episode – huge grumpy giant with a white beard. The true God is the giver – the giver of life and breath and everything. He is not the distant god of deism – he is intimately involved in every breath you take. Without him we are dead. To be with him is eternal life.

And then Paul tells the story of two men. The first Adam and the second Adam. Verse 26 \_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the idea of remnantal revelation and subversive fulfilment see Dan Strange, *Their Rock is Not Like Our Rock*.

This is a complete kick in the teeth to racism. There is only one race. There are different ethnicities, different nations – but there is only one race. We are all the same. That's so important. But the flip side of that truth is that we are all in the same problem. We can't point at ISIS or serial killers and call them monsters as if they are a completely different species. We can't divide society into the decent people and the criminals. We are all children of Adam, we all have the same human nature, we are all dysfunctional, all evil at heart, all capable of worst depravity, all by nature children of wrath.

But then there is a second man – v31 \_\_\_\_\_

The first man took the whole creation down into death, the second man is the resurrection man, bringing in the new creation.

The first man brought us into a world of evil and injustice liable to judgment. The second man is The Judge who will sort out all evil and injustice.

I wonder how often we think of Jesus as the judge. It's very good news and very scary news. It's very good news because that is what our world needs so desperately. You see the wars and mayhem and torture and corruption and injustice and evil and darkness – and we need a judge who will judge with justice and deal with all of it once and for all.

But it's very scary news because none of us can stand in that judgment. There will be no excuses. We will be judged by a man. We'll not be able to say to our judge, we're only human, you don't know the pressure I was under, you don't know how it felt – our judge is a man, tested in every way as we are, yet without sin. He has been there, he does know how it feels, he knows all the mitigating factors but even in all that he knows that it is what comes out of our hearts which produces sin and must be punished. On that day every mouth will be shut because we'll know that this is just justice.

Which brings us to the 3 days – the 3 time horizons – verse 30-31 \_\_\_\_\_

There is a past day – which was the day of darkness, ignorance – turn away from that, forget that day – don't cling onto it as the good old days, but also don't despair and think that what you did then is too bad to be forgiven.

There is the now day – today – the day of salvation, the day of proclamation – the day when people of all nations are commanded – not invited or suggested – *commanded* to repent – turn to Christ now, while there's still time. Stop taking refuge in idols and take refuge in Christ himself – because there's a storm coming – and that's the third day:

V31 \_\_\_\_\_ - the day of judgment. The day when all the dead will be raised – everyone – everyone who has ever lived, everyone you've ever known or seen – the celebrities, the nobodies – everyone will stand before the Jesus the Judge and the books will be open with everything you've ever done and said and through. And the only way you don't go into the lake of fire is if your name is written in the book of the Lamb who has been slain, who has gone through the fire instead of you.

- Zero – is where we start
- One true God
- Two men
- Three days

Don't worry about remembering that – the important thing to see here is that Paul is engaging with culture by telling the Bible story – from Adam to the second Adam, from creation to new creation. It

would be good if we get to know that story well and we get confident at sharing that story<sup>2</sup> – because that story is big enough to encompass everything else. It is Not like there is the real world of politics and the economy and wars and suffering and then there is the Bible story in a little corner here – No – the Bible story encompasses the real world of politics and the economy and war and suffering – it explains why the world is in such a mess – it gives the real answers to the real world. There is nothing someone will ask you or throw at you that will be outside of that story.

So let's tell that Bible story and let's focus it, as Paul does, on the Good God, idolatry, Jesus and the resurrection.

1. Good God – Mike Reeves, Glen Scrivener, John Piper – the gospel is to *bring you to God* – to enjoy him. Interesting that Paul doesn't come to people and say that God will meet your needs if you come to Christ but instead – God is already meeting your needs (cf. Acts 14:17).
2. Idolatry – postmoderns understand better than transgression – as noted by Tim Keller and ['Life Explored'](#)
3. Jesus - the man appointed to judge all. He must be the great hero of our story.
4. Resurrection – It's the resurrection that gives the cutting edge. That's what makes the difference between an interesting story and an imperative story. That's what makes the difference between "That's nice for you to believe story" and this is True Truth that is true for everyone – so even if you don't believe in Jesus now, one day you will one stand before him.

That is our model of mission, then finally and briefly – in verses 32 to 34 we see the reactions to this mission – 3 reactions:

- 1) Some mock and sneer – a resurrection day is nonsense to materialists and foolishness to philosophers and it is a deeply inconvenient truth to sinners. Notice they don't argue against Paul they mock him as stupid or unsophisticated. If you get that reaction sometimes when you share the gospel then you're probably on the right track. It is a very mockable message that doesn't fit at all with our culture.
- 2) Some are interested – "We want to hear more" – that's a good reaction – it doesn't necessarily mean someone will go all the way but it's a good thing to want to know more. We don't want to be like salesmen rushing people into a quick emotional decision. It might take someone months of examining the evidence and that is fine. If the truth is the truth and if God is opening eyes to that truth then people will get there.
- 3) Some follow and believe – v34 \_\_\_\_\_ - follow = church and this is no easy belief – almost every place Paul goes he gets beaten up or stoned or thrown in prison – you follow Paul and believe in his Christ it's not going to be easy – but these people have had their eyes opened to the Jesus who has defeated death and risen into new life and is going to raise the dead and bring in the new resurrection kingdom and they know that they need him: he is their only hope, the only true refuge.

What is your reaction to all this?

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<sup>2</sup> Good resources include Vaughan Roberts, *God's Big Picture*.