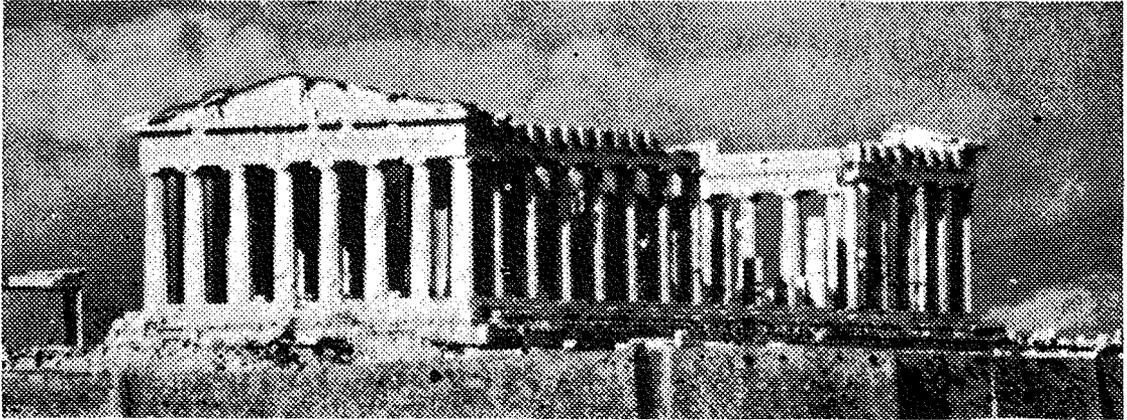

Crosscultural Communication of the Gospel

Martin Goldsmith



As evangelicals we assert that worldwide mission is a primary aim and concern for us all. Whether we go overseas or remain in Britain, we live today in a cauldron of different peoples and cultures of various religious and philosophical backgrounds. Witness to Christ will therefore involve us in cross-cultural communication. Paul's experiences in preaching to Gentiles demand our close attention and we shall want to study not only Acts 17, but also Acts 14 and those epistles addressed to non-Jews.

Before Paul approaches the Athenian Gentiles he has already witnessed among his fellow Jews (17:1, 10, 17). Why? Was he following the basic missionary strategy pattern of witnessing to people of our own sort before venturing into more difficult forms of mission? If so, then this would teach us that our primary task in mission is amongst those of our own race, class, age group or educational background. But this primary task would not be exclusive, for Paul does go on to outreach amongst the Gentile Athenians. Or was Paul starting his mission by going to the 'winnable', those prepared by historical circumstances for the reception of the Gospel? Certainly the Jews and proselytes were easier to reach for Christ than the Gentile outsiders. Should we as Christians seek to discern what segments of the population are most receptive to our message and concentrate on them first? But again

we would also want to move on to the harder groups in society. Or was Paul following the overall pattern of God's mission to the nations of the world—Jews first, then Samaritans and so on to the Gentiles and the uttermost parts of the world? Luke obviously emphasizes this basic structure in his writings, but it is surely the sweep of history rather than individual moments in history which demonstrate this pattern. Otherwise we should have to say that it is not biblical to engage in mission among Gentiles until we have first witnessed to Jews.

But certainly this passage does show us that mission is not only for Jews, but also for Gentiles. The Gospel of Christ is for all peoples and all sorts of people. A lack of interest in mission worldwide and amongst all peoples reflects a failure in biblical perspective.

Acts 14:11-13 and 17:18 reveal a failure to communicate adequately. With the Lycaonians this was evidently due partly to Paul's inability to speak the local language. Perhaps both cases show the difficulty of preaching the Gospel of Christ in a totally alien religious and philosophical context. Paul was well versed in Greek philosophy and able to quote directly from original sources as well as to refer more indirectly to pagan Greek philosophical ideas (17:28). But he still had major problems in preaching among Gentiles. We must accept the challenges. Good knowledge of the language is important—both overseas and also if we are to work effectively among some immigrant groups in Britain. We therefore need not only short-term workers, but also those who will learn the language and culture in order to communicate in depth. Paul's knowledge and use of non-Christian Greek philosophers also challenges us to more intense study of the religious and philosophical backgrounds of the people amongst whom we shall work. Sadly we often fail to train both clergy and laity in such cross-cultural mission amongst people of other faiths; even missionaries are sometimes still sent overseas (and that applies equally to 'secular' workers overseas!) with little relevant training of this sort.

What is Paul's attitude to the Athenians' religious beliefs? Is he commending them for the fact that they 'are very religious' (22)? Is he saying that Christianity is merely the natural crown and fulfilment of their former worship (23)? Such questions relate pressingly to us today, for the devoted sincerity and piety of many Muslims or followers of other religions impresses us. Do such people need the message of Jesus Christ? Do we have the right to preach to them and persuade them to be converted to the faith of Jesus Christ? Paul was engaged in mission amongst sophisticated Athenian Greeks with all the glories of their culture and philosophy. He was not preaching amongst primitive idolaters with barbaric religious forms, so this passage is a fair parallel to the best in non-Christian religion today.

Paul is not saying that their 'unknown god' is a demonic being whom they should abandon. He does however stress that the Athenians do not 'know' God—what a significant word 'know' is! It denotes a most intimate personal union and relationship. The word is used for sexual union between a man and his wife, which should represent the beauty of intimate love and oneness. It is used in Scripture for God's relationship with his beloved covenant people and our enjoyment of a deep relationship of love with him. Paul maintains that without Christ

the Athenians do not 'know' God.

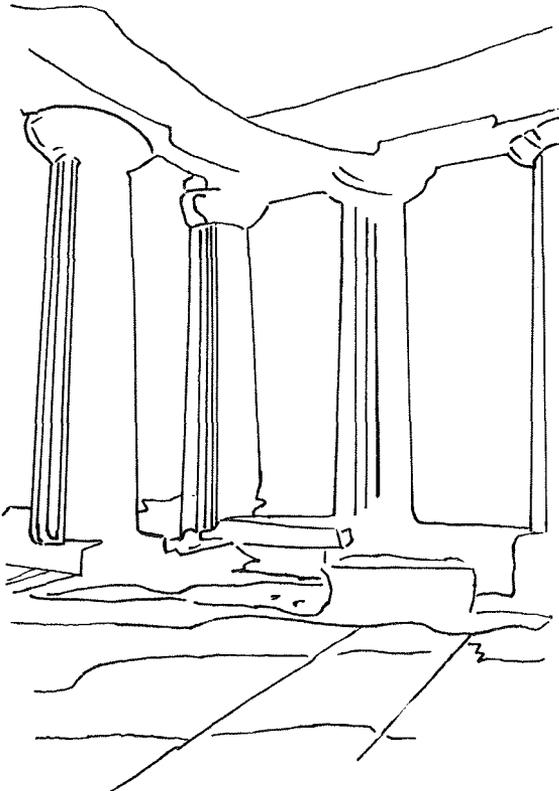
Although Paul does not deny that the Athenian deity is God, yet he does see that their beliefs concerning him need considerable correction. He therefore preaches to them about the fact of creation and deduces from this that God does not indwell man-made shrines (24), that he does not depend on our services (25) and that man cannot make representations of him in statues or idols (29). Although Paul unhesitatingly teaches with regard to wrong and untrue aspects of their religion, he does also use in his teaching one area of their religion which coincides with biblical truth (28b).

What then can we learn from Paul's attitude to Athenian religion? He is evidently prepared to see both truth and falsehood in their beliefs and practices. We may surely follow his example in our view of other religions. In the past there was a tendency among some Christians to denigrate all other religions and emphasize the demonic evils inherent in all other faiths. Such a negative attitude was neither charitable nor true to the facts. It ignored the remnants of the creational image of God in man. This image of God is fallen and thus corrupted, but traditional Christian theology has rightly maintained that the image of God is still present and visible in fallen man. Thus it remains true that even fallen non-Christian man can still love his wife. Love is of God and is good. But with the ubiquitous corrosion of sin even our love is 'depraved' and thus shot through with selfishness, pride and sin. Nothing in man is absolutely good, but likewise nothing in man is absolutely demonic without any remnant trace of the original image of God. This is not only true of man's moral activities and attitudes, but also of his religious belief systems. Truth remains in part, but corrupted throughout by the inextricable intertwining of demonic falsehood.

This mixture of truth and falsehood is most clearly seen in those religious systems which have their roots partly in biblical revelation. Islam and Judaism contain various truths which are obviously in agreement with God's Word in the Judaeo-Christian biblical revelation. We shall not reject their monotheism just because its biblical roots are now intertwined with rabbinic and other influences which have distorted their understanding of the character and working of the one God. This is to be paralleled with developments within the Christian church also. But Paul did not deny that the Athenian god was God indeed. We shall not deny that Allah or the god of Judaism is indeed Jehovah—nor that the 'god' of popular British religious belief is actually God.

The Christian follows Paul's example in rejoicing in every possible truth within other faiths and he will seek with all his energies to find such truths. Such searching has been popularized in books like *The Peace Child*, but they have also been the object of considerable theological debate. Many today are searching for parallels to the Christian faith even within religions whose roots are totally alien to the Judaeo-Christian faith. Thus the Sri Lankan theologian Lynn de Silva has attempted to relate the Buddhist doctrine of Anatta/No Self to Christian concepts of salvation in the loss of self through relationship with God. Others in Japan, India and Thailand are also finding parallel truths in Hinduism and Buddhism to Christian revelation. In Africa too some theologians bend over backwards to demonstrate that African primal religion contains beliefs about God which the Christian also rejoices in. Unfortunately many such positive approaches to non-Christian faiths are not equally concerned to unmask demonic untruth and so to underline the need for radical conversion, new birth and new life.

Paul does not hesitate to demonstrate a negative attitude to false beliefs in Athenian religion (24/25, 29) and so call them to repentance (30) because of the dread certainty of the future judgment (31). The need of repentance and the fact of judgment by



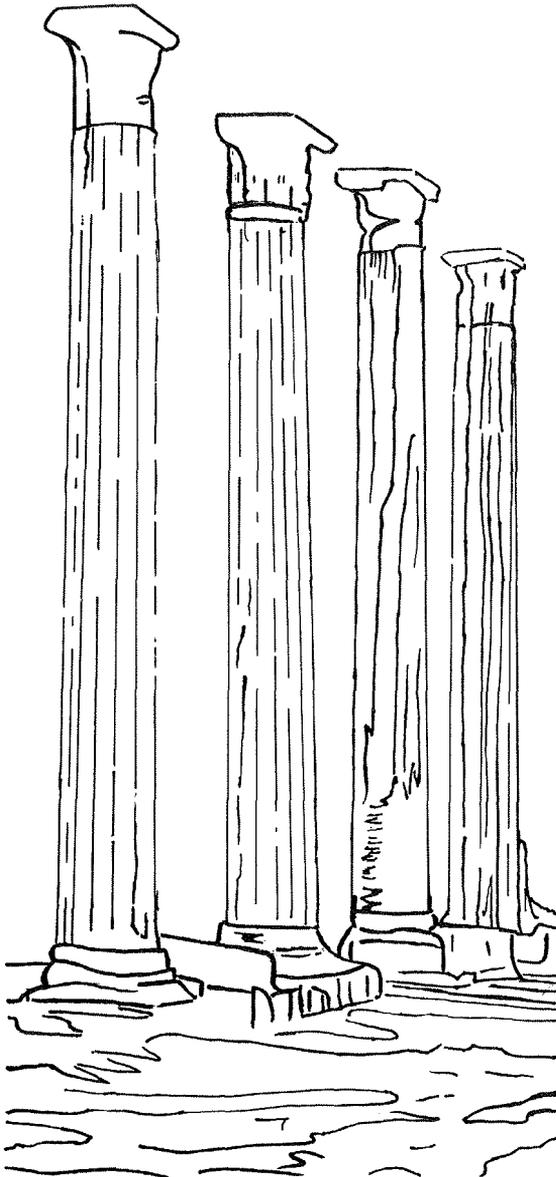
Christ are for 'all men everywhere' (30). Let us be faithful to the Pauline example in this too! There is a tendency today to soften the call to repentance, to blur the expectation of a coming judgment and to imagine that the sincerely religious foreigner is outside the scope of these truths.

In Old Testament times religious ignorance of the claims of Jehovah was not judged in the Gentile nations. The prophets revealed God's wrath and judgment against the nations' moral corruption, greed, pride and cruel violence. Only Israel, however, is judged for her idolatry and her rebellion against Jehovah. But now, Paul says, Jesus is risen and God has fixed the day for the final judgment of all peoples. No longer can men hide behind the excuse of ignorance, for the Israel-centred approach of the Old Testament has been widened in Christ to reach out to all peoples.

Paul must have known that actually many were still outside the possibility of knowing and hearing the good news of Jesus, but he must have assumed that the Gospel would quickly spread and the 'times of ignorance' would hastily end. It remains a tragic fact that for many the times of ignorance have apparently not yet ended, for the Church has been selfishly insular. Internal squabbles and materialistic self-seeking have combined with faithless lack of vision to prevent us dedicating ourselves and all we have to worldwide mission to 'all men everywhere'.

This passage does not clarify the question of what is the eternal destiny of those who have not yet heard of the resurrection of Jesus and thus received assurance of the coming judgment (31). These verses do not say whether the unevangelized are still reckoned by God to be in 'times of ignorance' and thus not to be judged for religious ignorance and failure to believe in Jesus Christ. But these verses do make it abundantly clear that now is the time when all men everywhere should be given the opportunity to repent and believe. God calls us to this task—let us pause even now and ask God what he wants us to be doing towards this end.

Paul uses the ill-defined beliefs and inadequate philosophical ideas of his Greek audience as a bridge towards greater truth. It is a basic idea in any educational philosophy that we learn new truths more easily if they are related to and built upon already known truths. This applies equally to the communication of the Christian faith. We are not preaching into a vacuum, but should build upon religious or moral truth already believed by our hearers.



Paul is also tactful in starting his witness with agreement with his audience. He follows the same pattern in most of his letters, starting with commendation and only then moving to the less acceptable aspects of his message. We likewise should not start our witness among Muslims with a hot argument about Jesus as the Son of God—or among traditional Roman Catholics with a debate on the Virgin Mary. We have many agreed bridges which are a better foundation on which to build.

In earlier days it was customary to analyse the various apostolic messages in Acts and seek to find the common points in them all in order to define what is the fundamental Christian message. This approach fails to take into account the contexts in

which the Gospel is preached. But Christian revelation is never an unrelated word from God. God's Word is always intimately related to man. This is in stark contrast to the Islamic revelation or way, which is on a heavenly tablet and unrelated to the agent of revelation or to the recipient of revelation. But Christian revelation comes through human agents who are intimately involved in the formation of the message and it is directly related to the historical and cultural context of its recipients. Jesus himself as the Word of God is also 'acculturated'—he lived as a specific person in a specific location at a specific time in history. This has enormous implications for the whole question of biblical interpretation, but that is not our task in this article!

Paul's message in Acts 17 is directly related to his Gentile audience. It differs in various ways from his messages to Jews. Likewise we should not formulate a rigid message which is conveyed to all people alike without taking into consideration their particular beliefs and backgrounds. What then is Paul's message here to this Gentile audience? Creation plays a primary part and, as I have pointed out elsewhere,¹ this will be standard for most Christian evangelism in primal religious areas. Creation leads to the claim that all men and nations should serve God (25-27) rather than man-made idols (29). The key to Paul's message and appeal is the fact of Jesus' resurrection (18, 31, 32) which of course assumes the fact of his death. But it is the resurrection rather than the cross which is primary here. This leads to the challenge of the coming judgment and thus the call to repentance.

What was the result of Paul's preaching? Some mocked and some believed, but all were forced to some decision. Cross-cultural communication, like all other Christian mission, must aim to bring men to a point of decision based on an adequate understanding of the Christian faith. This is our goal with those of our own race, immigrants and overseas students, people of all nations everywhere. And we therefore look forward eagerly to that great day when people 'from every tribe and tongue and people and nation' (Rev. 5:9) will worship the Lord with us in his presence.

We dedicate ourselves to this end in mission to 'all men everywhere'.

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¹ See the author's *Don't Just Stand There*—IVP.