

Worldview Evangelism

- Athens Revisited

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I would like to think that most of us have become convinced of the primacy of what might generically be called worldview evangelism. In the recent past, at least in North America and Europe, evangelism consisted of a fairly aggressive presentation of one small part of the Bible's story line. Most non-Christians to whom we presented the gospel shared enough common language and outlook with us that we did not find it necessary to unpack the entire plot line of the Bible. A mere quarter of a century ago, if we were dealing with an atheist, he or she was not a generic atheist but a Christian atheist—that is, the God he or she did not believe in was more or less a god of discernibly Judeo-Christian provenance. The atheist was not particularly denying the existence of Hindu gods — Krishna, perhaps — but the God of the Bible. But that meant that the categories were still ours. The domain of discourse was ours.

When I was a child, if I had said, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see," 80 percent of the kids in my school could have responded, "Hark the incarnate deity." That was because Christmas carols like "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" were sung in home, church, school, and street. These kids may not have understood all the words, but this domain of Christian discourse was still theirs. Young people at university doubtless imbibed massive doses of naturalism, but in most English departments it was still assumed you could not plumb the vast heritage of English poetry if you possessed no knowledge of the language, metaphors, themes, and categories of the Bible.

In those days, then, evangelism presupposed that most unbelievers, whether they were atheists or agnostics or deists or theists, nevertheless knew that the Bible begins with God, that this God is both personal and transcendent, that he made the universe and made it good, and that the Fall introduced sin and attracted the curse. Virtually everyone knew that the Bible has two Testaments. History moves in a straight line. There is a difference between good and evil, right and wrong, truth and error, fact and fiction. They knew that Christians believe there is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be feared. Christmas is bound up with Jesus' birth; Good Friday and Easter, with Jesus' death and resurrection. Those were the givens. So what we pushed in evangelism was the seriousness of sin, the freedom of grace, who Jesus really is, what his death is about, and the urgency of repentance and faith. That was evangelism. Of course, we tilted things in certain ways depending on the people we were addressing; the focus was different when evangelizing in different subcultural settings — in the Bible Belt, for instance, or in an Italian-Catholic section of New York, or in an Ivy League university. But for most of us, evangelism was connected with articulating and pressing home a very small part of the Bible's plot line.

In many seminaries like Trinity, of course, we recognized that missionaries being trained to communicate the gospel in radically different cultures needed something more. A missionary to Japan or Thailand or north India would have to learn not only another language or two but also another culture. No less important, they would have to begin their evangelism farther back, because many of their hearers would have no knowledge of the Bible at all and would tenaciously hold to some worldview structures that were fundamentally at odds with the Bible. The best schools gave such training to their missionary candidates. But pastors and campus workers were rarely trained along such lines. After all, they were doing nothing more than evangelizing people who shared their own cultural assumptions, or at least people located in the same

domain of discourse, weren't they?

We were naive, of course. We were right, a quarter of a century ago, when we sang, "The times they are a-changin'." Of course, there were many places in America where you could evangelize churchy people who still retained substantial elements of a Judeo-Christian worldview. There are still places like that today: the over-fifties in the Midwest, parts of the Bible Belt. But in the New England states, in the Pacific Northwest, in universities almost anywhere in the country, in pockets of the population such as media people, and in many parts of the entire Western world, the degree of biblical illiteracy cannot be overestimated. One of my students commented a week ago that he was walking in Chicago with his girlfriend, who had a wooden cross hanging from a chain around her neck. A lad stopped her on the sidewalk and asked why she had a plus sign for a necklace. The people whom we evangelize on university campuses usually do not know that the Bible has two Testaments. As Phillip Jensen says, you have to explain to them the purpose of the big numbers and little numbers. They have never heard of Abraham, David, Solomon, Paul — let alone Haggai or Zechariah. They may have heard of Moses, but only so as to confuse him with Charlton Heston.

But this analysis is still superficial. My point is not so much that these people are ignorant of biblical data (though that is true) as that, having lost touch with the Judeo-Christian heritage that in one form or another (sometimes bowdlerized) long nourished the West, they are not clean slates waiting for us to write on them. They are not empty hard drives waiting for us to download our Christian files onto them. Rather, they have inevitably developed an array of alternative worldviews. They are hard drives full of many other files that collectively constitute various non-Christian frames of reference.

The implications for evangelism are immense. I shall summarize four.

First, the people we wish to evangelize hold some fundamental positions that they are going to have to abandon to become Christians. To continue my computer analogy, they retain numerous files that are going to have to be erased or revised, because as presently written, those files are going to clash formidably with Christian files. At one level, of course, that is always so. That is why the gospel demands repentance and faith; indeed, it demands the regenerating, transforming work of the Spirit of God. But the less there is of a common, shared worldview between "evangelizer" and "evangelizee," between the biblically informed Christian and the biblically illiterate postmodern, the more traumatic the transition, the more decisive the change, the more stuff has to be unlearned.

Second, under these conditions evangelism means starting farther back. The good news of Jesus Christ — who he is and what he accomplished by his death, resurrection, and exaltation — is simply incoherent unless certain structures are already in place. You cannot make heads or tails of the real Jesus unless you have categories for the personal/transcendent God of the Bible; the nature of human beings made in the image of God; the sheer odium of rebellion against him; the curse that our rebellion has attracted; the spiritual, personal, familial, and social effects of our transgression; the nature of salvation; the holiness and wrath and love of God. One cannot make sense of the Bible's plot line without such basic ingredients; one cannot make sense of the Bible's portrayal of Jesus without such blocks in place. We cannot possibly agree on the solution that Jesus provides if we cannot agree on the problem he confronts. **That is why our evangelism must be "worldview" evangelism.** I shall flesh out what this means in a few moments.

Third, not for a moment am I suggesting that worldview evangelism is a restrictively propositional exercise. It is certainly not less than propositional; the Bible not only presents us with many propositions, but it insists in some cases that unless one believes those propositions one is lost. The point can easily be confirmed by a close reading of the gospel of John. For all its complementary perspectives, it repeatedly makes statements like "Unless you believe that . . ." One really ought not be forced to choose between propositions and relational faith any more than one should be forced to choose between the left wing of an airplane and the right. At its core, worldview evangelism is as encompassing as the Bible. We are called not only to certain propositional confession but also to loyal faith in Jesus Christ, the truth incarnate; to repentance from dead works to serve the living God; to life transformed by the Holy Spirit, given to us in anticipation of the consummated life to come; to a new community that lives and loves and behaves in joyful and principled submission to the Word of the King, our Maker and Redeemer. This massive worldview touches everything, embraces everything. It can be simply put, for it has a center; it can be endlessly expounded and lived out, for in its scope it has no restrictive

perimeter.

Fourth, the evangelist must find ways into the values, heart, thought patterns — in short, the worldview — of those who are being evangelized but must not let that non-Christian worldview domesticate the biblical message. The evangelist must find bridges into the other's frame of reference, or no communication is possible; the evangelist will remain ghettoized. Nevertheless, faithful worldview evangelism under these circumstances will sooner or later find the evangelist trying to modify or destroy some of the alien worldview and to present another entire structure of thought and conduct that is unimarginably more glorious, coherent, consistent, and finally true.

All of this, of course, the apostle Paul well understood. In particular, by his own example he teaches us the difference between evangelizing those who largely share your biblical worldview and evangelizing those who are biblically illiterate. In Acts 13:16-41, we read Paul's evangelistic address in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. The setting, a synagogue, ensures that his hearers are Jews, Gentile proselytes to Judaism, and Godfearers — in every case, people thoroughly informed by the Bible (what we would today call the Old Testament). In this context, Paul selectively narrates Old Testament history in order to prove that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah. He quotes biblical texts, reasons his way through them, and argues that the resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of biblical prophecies about the Holy One in David's line not seeing decay. From Jesus' resurrection, Paul argues back to Jesus' death and its significance — ultimately, the forgiveness of sins and justification before God (vv. 38-39). Paul ends with a biblical passage warning of fearful judgment against skepticism and unbelief. Here, then, is the apostolic equivalent to evangelism among churchy folk, biblically literate folk—the kind of people who already, at a certain level, know their Bibles.

In Acts 17:16-34, however, one finds the apostle Paul evangelizing intelligent Athenians who are utterly biblically illiterate. Here his approach is remarkably different, and has much to teach us as we attempt to evangelize a new generation of biblical illiterates.

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babblers wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for

'In him we live and move and have our being';

as even some of your own poets have said,

'For we are indeed his offspring.'

Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by

the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

I have organized the rest of what I have to say under four topics: the realities Paul faces, the priorities he adopts, the framework he establishes, and the nonnegotiable gospel he preaches.

THE REALITIES PAUL FACES

Apart from their obvious biblical illiteracy — these Athenian intellectuals had never heard of Moses, never cracked a Bible — three features of this culture are striking.

First, the Roman Empire was characterized not only by large-scale empirical pluralism but also by government-sponsored religious pluralism. The Romans knew that a captive people were more likely to rebel if they could align religion, land, and people. Partly to break up this threefold cord, the Romans insisted on adopting into their own pantheon some of the gods of any newly subjugated people, and they insisted equally strongly that the newly subjugated people adopt some of the Roman gods. In any potential civil war, therefore, it would be quite unclear which side the gods were helping — and this policy of god-swaps strengthened the likelihood of imperial peace. It also meant that religious pluralism was not only endemic to the Empire but was buttressed by the force of law. After all, it was a capital offense to desecrate a temple — any temple. But let no temple and no God challenge Washington — I mean Rome.

Second, like us, Paul was dealing not with people who were biblically illiterate and therefore had no worldview, but with people who vociferously argued for various competing and powerful worldviews. Two are mentioned in the text: Epicurean and Stoic (v. 18). In the first century, philosophy did not have the fairly esoteric and abstract connotations it has today, connected with minor departments in large universities. It referred to an entire way of life, based on a rigorous and self-consistent intellectual system — close to what we mean by worldview. The ideal of Epicurean philosophy, Epicurean worldview, was an undisturbed life — a life of tranquility, untroubled by undue involvement in human affairs. The gods themselves are composed of atoms so fine they live in calmness in the spaces between the worlds. As the gods are nicely removed from the hurly-burly of life, so human beings should seek the same ideal. But over against this vision, as we shall see, Paul presents a God who is actively involved in this world as its Creator, providential Ruler, Judge, and self-disclosing Savior.

Stoic philosophy thought of god as all-pervasive, more or less in a pantheistic sense, so that the human ideal was to live life in line with what is ultimately real, to conduct life in line with this god/principle of reason, which must rule over emotion and passion. Stoicism, as someone has commented, was “marked by great moral earnestness and a high sense of duty.” Against such a vision, the God that Paul presents, far from being pantheistic, is personal, distinct from the creation, and is our final judge. Instead of focusing on “universal reason tapped into by human reasoning,” Paul contrasts divine will and sovereignty with human dependence and need. In short, there is a massive clash of worldviews.

Of course, there were other Greek and Latin worldviews. There is no mention here of the sophists or of the atheistic philosophical materialists such as Lucretius. What is clear is that Paul here finds himself evangelizing men and women deeply committed to one fundamentally alien worldview or another.

Third, no less striking is the sneering tone of condescension they display in verse 18: **What is this babblers trying to say?**

— this "seed picker," this little bird fluttering around picking up disconnected scraps of incoherent information, this second-class mind? Others remarked, **He seems to be advocating foreign gods.** Of course, as it turns out, some of these people become genuinely interested in the gospel. The tenor of condescension is unmistakable, however, when an alien worldview feels secure in its thoughtless majority

These, then, are the realities Paul faces.

THE PRIORITIES PAUL ADOPTS

The most immediate and striking response of the apostle Paul to all that he witnesses in Athens is an intuitively biblical analysis: he is **greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols** (v. 16). Paul might have been overwhelmed by Athens' reputation as the Oxford or Cambridge or Harvard of the ancient world (though universities per se did not then exist). He might have admired the architecture, gazing at the Parthenon. But Paul is neither intimidated nor snookered by Athens; he sees the idolatry. How we need Christians in our universities and high places who are neither impressed nor intimidated by reputation and accomplishment if it is nothing more than idolatry!

The apostle sets out, then, to evangelize. He aims at two quite different groups. As usual, he attaches a certain priority to evangelizing Jews and Godfearing Gentiles, the churchy folk, the biblically literate people; he reasons in the synagogue **with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks** (v. 17a). He has a theological reason for this priority that we cannot examine here, but in any case we must never forget to evangelize such people. Second, he evangelizes the ordinary pagans who have no connection with the Bible: he evangelizes day by day in the market place, targeting anyone who happens to be there, most of whom would have been biblically illiterate (v. 17b). He does not wait for an invitation to the Areopagus. He simply gets on with his evangelism, and the invitation to the Areopagus is the result (v. 18).

These, then, are his priorities: God-centered cultural analysis, and persistent evangelism of both biblical literates and biblical illiterates.

Perhaps I should add that there is at least one fundamental difference between Paul's situation and ours. When Paul evangelizes biblical illiterates, he is dealing with people whose heritage has not in recent centuries had anything to do with biblical religion. So when they react negatively to him, they do so solely because, from their perspective, his frame of reference is so alien to their own. They are not rejecting him in part because they are still running away from their own heritage. That is the additional problem we sometimes face. We sometimes deal with men and women who have adopted a worldview that is not only at several points profoundly antithetical to a biblical worldview but also self-consciously chosen over against that biblical worldview. That opens up some opportunities for us, but it raises some additional barriers as well. However, we cannot probe these opportunities and barriers here. It is enough to observe the priorities that Paul adopts.

THE FRAMEWORK PAUL ESTABLISHES

Here it will be helpful to run through Paul's argument from 17:22 to 17:31. Before I do so, however, I want to make three preliminary observations.

First, it takes you about two minutes to read this record of Paul's address. But speeches before the Areopagus were not known for their brevity. In other words, we must remember that this is a condensed report of a much longer speech. Doubtless every sentence, in some cases every clause, constituted a point that Paul expanded upon at length.

Second, if you want to know a little more closely just how he would have expanded each point, it is easier to discover than some people think. For there are many points of comparison between these sermon notes and, for instance, Romans. I'll draw attention to one or two of the parallels as we move on.

Third, there is a fascinating choice of vocabulary. It has often been shown that many of the expressions in this address, especially in the early parts, are the sorts of things one would have found in Stoic circles. Yet in every case, Paul tweaks them so that in his context they convey the peculiar emphases he wants to assign to them. In other words, **the vocabulary is linguistically appropriate to his hearers**, but at the level of the sentence and the paragraph, Paul in this report is saying just what he wants to say; he is establishing a biblical worldview.

Now let us scan the framework Paul establishes.

First, he establishes that God is the creator of **the world and everything in it** (17:24). How much he enlarged on this point we cannot be certain, but we know from his other writings how his mind ran. The creation establishes that God is other than the created order; pantheism is ruled out. It also establishes human accountability; we owe our Creator everything, and to defy him and set ourselves up as the center of the universe is the heart of all sin. Worse, to cherish and worship created things instead of the Creator is the essence of idolatry.

Second, Paul insists that God **is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands** (v. 24). The sovereignty of God over the whole universe stands over against views that assign this god or that goddess a particular domain — perhaps the sea (Neptune), or tribal gods with merely regional or ethnic interests. The God of the Bible is sovereign over everything. This teaching grounds the doctrine of providence. Because of the universality of his reign, God cannot be domesticated — not even by temples (v. 24). Paul is not denying the historical importance of the temple in Jerusalem, still less that God uniquely disclosed himself there. Rather, he denies that God is limited to temples, and that he can be domesticated or squeezed or tapped into by the cultus of any temple (which of course threatens popular pagan practice). He is so much bigger than that.

Third, God is the God of aseity: **he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything** (17:25). Aseity is a word now largely fallen into disuse, though it was common in Puritan times. Etymologically it comes from the Latin *a se* — "from himself." God is so utterly "from himself" that he does not need us; he is not only self-existent (a term we often deploy with respect to God's origins — the existence of everything else is God-dependent, but God himself is self-existent), but he is utterly independent of his created order so far as his own well-being or contentment or existence are concerned. God does not need us — a very different perspective from that of polytheism, where human beings and gods interact in all kinds of ways bound up with the finiteness and needs of the gods. The God of the Bible would not come to us if, rather whimsically, he wanted a McDonald's hamburger; the cattle on a thousand hills are already his.

Fourth, the truth of the matter is the converse: we are utterly dependent on him — **he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else** (v. 25b). This strips us of our vaunted independence; it is the human correlative of the doctrines of creation and providence.

Fifth, from theology proper, Paul turns to anthropology. He insists that all nations descended from one man (v. 26). This contradicts not a few ancient notions of human descent, which conjectured that different ethnic groups came into being in quite different ways. But Paul has a universal gospel that is based on a universal problem (cf. Rom. 5; 1 Cor. 15). If sin and death were introduced into the one human race by one man such that the decisive act of another man is required to reverse them, then it is important for Paul to get the anthropology right so that the soteriology is right. We cannot agree on the solution if we cannot agree on the problem. But Paul's stance has yet wider implications; there is no trace of racism here. Moreover, however much he holds that God has enjoyed a peculiar covenant relationship with Israel, because he is a monotheist, Paul holds that God must be sovereign over all the nations. Did he, perhaps, develop some of the lines of argument one finds in Isaiah 40ff.? If there is but one God, that God must in some sense be the God of all, whether his being and status are recognized by all or not.

Sixth, for the first time one finds an explicit reference to something wrong in this universe that God created. His providential rule over all was with the purpose that some would reach out for him and find him (v. 27). In short order Paul will say much more about sin (without actually using the word). Here he is preparing the way. The assumption is that the

race as a whole does not know the God who made them. Something has gone profoundly wrong.

Seventh, although it has been important for him to establish God's transcendence, Paul does not want such an emphasis to drift toward what would later be called deism. The God he has in mind **is not far from each one of us** (v. 27). He is immanent. Paul will not allow any suspicion that God is careless or indifferent about people; he is never far from us. Moreover, the apostle recognizes that some of this truth is acknowledged in some pagan religions. When Greek thought (or much of it) spoke of one "God" as opposed to many gods, very often the assumption was more or less pantheistic. That structure of thought Paul has already ruled out. Still, some of its emphases were not wrong if put within a better framework. We live and move and have our being in this God, and we are his offspring (17:28) — not, for Paul, in some pantheistic sense, but as an expression of God's personal and immediate concern for our well-being.

Eighth, the entailment of this theology and this anthropology is to clarify what sin is and to make idolatry utterly reprehensible (v. 29). Doubtless Paul enlarged this point very much in terms of, say, Isaiah 44-45 and Romans 1. For he cannot rightly introduce Jesus and his role as Savior until he establishes what the problem is; he cannot make the good news clear until he elucidates the bad news from which the good news rescues us.

Ninth, Paul also introduces what might be called a philosophy of history — or better, perhaps, a certain view of time. Many Greeks in the ancient world thought that time went round and round in circles. Paul establishes a linear framework: creation at a fixed point; a long period that is past with respect to Paul's present in which God acted in a certain way (**In the past God over-looked such ignorance**); a now that is pregnant with massive changes; and a future (v. 31) that is the final termination of this world order, a time of final judgment. The massive changes of Paul's dramatic now are bound up with the coming of Jesus and the dawning of the gospel. Paul has set the stage so as to introduce Jesus.

So here is the framework Paul establishes. He has, in fact, constructed a biblical worldview. But he has not done so simply for the pleasure of creating a worldview. In this context he has done so in order to provide a framework in which Jesus himself, not least his death and resurrection, makes sense. Otherwise nothing that Paul wants to say about Jesus will make sense.

This is the framework Paul establishes.

THE NONNEGOTIABLE GOSPEL PAUL PREACHES

We read again verse 31:

**For [God] 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.**

Here, at last, Jesus is introduced.

I want to emphasize two things. First, it is extraordinarily important to see that Paul has established the framework of the biblical metanarrative before he introduces Jesus. If metaphysics is a sort of big physics that explains all the other branches of physics, similarly metanarrative is the big story that explains all the other stories. By and large, postmodernists love stories, especially ambiguous or symbol-laden narratives. But they hate the metanarrative, the big story that makes all the little stories coherent. But what Paul provides is the biblical metanarrative. This is the big story in the Bible that frames and explains all the little stories. Without this big story, the accounts of Jesus will not make any sense — and Paul knows it.

For instance, if in a vague, New Age, postmodern context, we affirm something like "God loves you," this short

expression may carry a very different set of associations than we who are Christians might think. We already assume that men and women are guilty and that the clearest and deepest expression of God's love is in the cross, where God's own Son dealt with our sin at the expense of his own life. But if people know nothing of this story line, then the same words, "God loves you," may be an adequate summary of the stance adopted by Jodie Foster in her recent film, *Contact*. The alien power is beneficent, wise, good, and interested in our well-being. There is nothing whatever to do with moral accountability, sin, guilt, and how God takes action to remove our sin by the death of his Son. The one vision nestles into the framework of biblical Christianity; the other nestles comfortably into the worldview of New Age optimism. In short, without the big story, without the metanarrative, the little story or the little expression becomes either incoherent or positively misleading. Paul understands the point.

Second, what is striking is that Paul does not flinch from affirming the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. And that is what causes so much offense that Paul is cut off, and the Areopagus address comes to an end. Paul was thoroughly aware, of course, that most Greeks adopted some form of dualism. Matter is bad, or at least relatively bad; spirit is good. To imagine someone coming back from the dead in bodily form was not saying anything desirable, still less believable. Bodily resurrection from the dead was irrational; it was an oxymoron, like intelligent slug or boiled ice. So some of Paul's hearers have had enough, and they openly sneer and end the meeting (v. 32). If Paul had spoken instead of Jesus' immortality, his eternal spiritual longevity quite apart from any body, he would have caused no umbrage. But Paul does not flinch. Elsewhere he argues that if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then the apostles are liars, and we are still dead in our trespasses and sins (I Cor. 15). He remains faithful to that vision here. Paul does not trim the gospel to make it acceptable to the worldview of his listeners.

For Paul, then, there is some irreducible and nonnegotiable content to the gospel, content that must not be abandoned, no matter how unacceptable it is to some other worldview. It follows that especially when we are trying hard to connect wisely with some worldview other than our own, we must give no less careful attention to the nonnegotiables of the gospel, lest in our efforts to communicate wisely and with relevance, we unwittingly sacrifice what we mean to communicate.

But suddenly we overhear the muttered objection of the critic. Can it not be argued that Paul here makes a fundamental mistake? Elsewhere in Acts he frequently preaches with much greater fruitfulness, and in those cases he does not stoop to all this worldview stuff. He just preaches Jesus and his cross and resurrection, and men and women get converted. Here, a piddling number believe (v. 34). In fact, Paul's next stop in Greece after Athens is Corinth. Reflecting later on his experiences there, Paul writes to the Corinthians and reminds them **For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified** (I Cor. 2:2) — doubtless because he was reflecting with some sour-faced chagrin on his flawed approach in Athens. So let us be frank, the critics charge, and admit that Paul made a huge mistake in Athens and stop holding up Acts 17 as if it were a model of anything except what not to do. The man goofed: he appealed to natural theology; he tried to construct redemptive history; he attempted to form a worldview when he should have stuck to his last and preached Jesus and the cross.

I sometimes wish this reading were correct, but it is profoundly mistaken for a number of reasons.

(1) It is not the natural reading of Acts. As Luke works through his book, he does not at this point in his narrative send up a red flag and warn us that at this point Paul makes a ghastly mistake. The false reading is utterly dependent on taking I Corinthians in a certain way (a mistaken way, as we shall see), and then reading it into Acts 17.

(2) What Paul expresses, according to Luke's report of the Areopagus address, is very much in line with Paul's own theology, not least his theology in the opening chapters of Romans.

(3) Strictly speaking, Paul does not say that only a "few" men believed. He says *tines de andres*, "certain people," along with *heteroi*, "others." These are in line with other descriptions. The numbers could scarcely have been large, because the numbers in the Areopagus could not have been very large in the first place.

(4) Transparently, Paul was cut off when he got to the resurrection of Jesus (vv. 31-32). But judging from all we know of him — both from a book like Romans and from the descriptions of him in Acts — we know where he would have gone from here.

(5) That is entirely in line with the fact that what Paul had already been preaching in the marketplace to the biblically illiterate pagans was the cc gospel" (v. 18).

(6) At this point in his life Paul was not a rookie. Far from being fresh out of seminary and still trying to establish the precise pattern of his ministry, on any chronology he had already been through twenty years of thrilling and brutal ministry. Nor is this Paul's first time among biblically illiterate pagans or among intellectuals.

(7) In any case, 1 Corinthians 2 does not cast Paul's resolve to preach Christ crucified against the background of what had happened to him in Athens. He does not say, in effect, "Owing to my serious mistakes in Athens, when I arrived in Corinth I resolved to preach only Christ and him crucified." Rather, in 1 Corinthians Paul's resolve to preach Christ crucified is cast against the background of what Christians in Corinth were attracted to — namely, to a form of triumphalism that espoused an ostensible wisdom that Paul detests. It is a wisdom full of pride and rhetoric and showmanship. Against this background, Paul takes a very different course. Knowing that believers must boast only in the Lord and follow quite a different wisdom (1 Cor. 1), he resolves to preach Christ and him crucified.

(8) In any case, it would be wrong to think that Paul has no interest in worldviews. Writing after 1 Corinthians 2, Paul can say, **We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ** (2 Cor. 10:45). The context shows that Paul is not here interested so much in disciplining the individual's private thought life (though that certainly concerns him elsewhere) as in bringing into obedience to Christ every thought structure, every worldview, that presents opposition to his beloved Master. In other words, Paul thought "worldviewishly" (if that is not too monstrous a neologism). That is clear in many of his writings; it is clear in both 2 Corinthians 10 and in Acts 17.

(9) Finally, the first line of Acts 17:34 is sometimes misconstrued: "A few men became followers of Paul and believed." Many have assumed Luke means that a few people became Christians on the spot and followers of Paul. But that reverses what is said. Moreover, Paul has not yet given much gospel — in precisely what sense would they have become Christians? It is better to follow the text exactly. Following Paul's address, no one became a Christian on the spot. But some did become followers of Paul. In consequence, in due course they grasped the gospel and believed; they became Christians. This is entirely in line with the experience of many evangelists working in a university environment today

A couple of years ago I spoke evangelistically at a large meeting in Oxford. So far as I know, no one became a Christian at that meeting. But sixteen students signed up for a six-week "Discovering Christianity" Bible study. A few weeks after the meeting, the curate, Vaughan Roberts, wrote me a note to tell me that eleven of the sixteen had clearly become Christians already, and he was praying for the remaining five. In other words, as a result of that meeting, some became "followers of Jesus," and in due course believed. That is often the pattern when part of the evangelistic strategy is to establish a worldview, a frame of reference, to make the meaning of Jesus and the gospel unmistakably plain.

In short, however sensitive Paul is to the needs and outlook of the people he is evangelizing, and however flexible he is in shaping the gospel to address them directly, we must see that there remains for him irreducible content to the gospel. That content is nonnegotiable, even if it is remarkably offensive to our hearers. If it is offensive, we may have to decide whether it is offensive because of the intrinsic message or because we have still not done an adequate job of establishing the frame of reference in which it alone makes sense. But the gospel itself must never be compromised.

SOME CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

I offer three concluding reflections. First, the challenge of worldview evangelism is not to make simple things complicated

but to make clear to others some fairly complicated things that we simply assume. This can be done in fifteen minutes with the sort of [presentation Phillip Jensen and Tony Payne have constructed](#). It might be done in seven consecutive expositions running right through the first eight chapters of Romans. It might be done with the six months of Bible teaching, beginning with Genesis, that many [New Tribes Mission](#) personnel now use before they get to Jesus. But it must be done.

Second, the challenge of worldview evangelism is not primarily to think in philosophical categories, but it is to make it clear that closing with Jesus has content (it is connected with a real, historical Jesus about whom certain things must be said and believed) and is all-embracing (it affects conduct, relationships, values, priorities). It is not reducible to a preferential religious option among many, designed primarily to make me feel good about myself.

Third, the challenge of worldview evangelism is not primarily a matter of how to get back into the discussion with biblically illiterate people whose perspectives may be very dissimilar to our own. Rather, worldview evangelism focuses primarily on where the discussion goes. There are many ways of getting into discussion; the crucial question is whether the Christian witness has a clear, relatively simple, straightforward grasp of what the Bible's story line is, how it must give form to a worldview, and how the wonderful news of the gospel fits powerfully into this true story — all told in such a way that men and women can see its relevance, power, truthfulness, and life-changing capacity.

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