

# PREACHING TO PAGANS

## THE PREACHER AND HIS WORLD

Passage : Acts 17:16-34

Good training in preaching is hard to find today. In training for this work the Bible is indispensable, and the sermons in Acts should come high on the list of our God-given aids. The sermons in Acts 2 and 3 were addressed to Jews, who had had centuries of Bible knowledge; therefore Peter used many Bible quotations. These sermons are a help to us in preaching to people with knowledge of the Bible. However, the Greeks in Athens had no Bible knowledge, so Paul used quotations from their own poets instead.

This is a very important point to grasp. We need a different approach in preaching to non-Christians from that which is appropriate when preaching to professing Christians. In this country, for many generations most of our evangelism has been carried on inside our churches and has largely been addressed to nominal Christians. However, even inside our churches today- especially among young people- there is virtually no Bible knowledge; many of our young people have no Sunday School background.

Looking at the great evangelists of the recent past (e.g. Moody), and of the present (e.g. Billy Graham), we can see that Western evangelists have reaped results mainly from the fringe of the church-

Real preaching can come only from a heart which has been touched and renewed by the Holy Spirit. From verses 16-21 we will see that:

### **1. Paul's heart was stirred by the spiritual tragedy of the people**

If we visited Athens today, we would be impressed by much of the architectural remains of famous temples like the Acropolis, but Paul saw the temples in use. Athens then was "a forest of idols", and everyone, even the great brains of the city, took it for granted but Paul's heart was moved at the intellectual depravity of the city.

This is what keeps preaching from becoming nothing more than a routine- something we do only because we are asked to do it, or because we are 'professionals'. Our hearts must be constantly stirred by the pitiful sight of people without God and therefore without hope. Compare this with Mark 6:34- Jesus wanted to have a 'day off' with His disciples, but when they got to their destination He found Himself confronted by a large crowd. We would have been annoyed at being interrupted, but "He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd".

*"While Paul was in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16)*

es- from people who had had some previous contact with the gospel. The result has been that much evangelism has had small Biblical content, since the evangelist has regarded himself as reaping where someone had already sown. The New Testament picture of an evangelist is that of a sower and reaper, and our evangelism should consist both of sowing and reaping since we will undoubtedly be addressing people who may know little or nothing about the gospel. This is why a study of this sermon of Paul's can be of such great help to us. Let us begin our study by looking at the preacher himself.

We are often stirred by injustice in our world, by the threat of a nuclear war, by starvation in the Third World, but non-Christians are also moved by these things. Such matters are increasingly being put at the top of the agenda by Christians, and it is a matter for sorrow that so many of us are not concerned about people's deeper spiritual needs, about which the world knows nothing. Jesus saw the multitudes on their way to destruction, and that is what stirred His heart. If we shut ourselves away in our little Christian corner and are not concerned for the human race, it will be easy for us to denounce its pleasure; but if our hearts have been

touched by the Holy Spirit we will weep over the tragedy of the many nice, decent, ordinary people going blindly to destruction because they have no knowledge of Christ. If we are never touched like this, we will never preach in a way that pleases God.

However, the word ‘stirred’ as used in our passage has a much stronger meaning than that normally understood today. The RSV translates it as “indignant”. Why was Paul indignant? It was because of the injustice being done to God’s honour and glory by idolatry. Are we ever stirred to indignation at the way the name of God and of Christ is used around us, or by the ideas people have about God? Are we concerned that so many other religions, instead of leading people to God are in fact leading them to idols? Do we regard it as a dreadful thing that so many people today think that Hinduism (for example) and Christianity are proclaiming the same God? Are we horrified when Christian leaders state openly that all religions are leading to the same God- a statement completely contrary to the teaching of the Bible?

Paul was horrified that man, made in the image of God, should be so ignorant about Him (see v.29). He was concerned not only about man’s needs but also about God’s honour. We, too, should be indignant that in our country, with its great Christian heritage, so much error is proclaimed about God over radio and TV. If these things do not trouble us, no amount of training will make us effective preachers of the gospel.

## **2. Paul did not wait to be asked to speak**

Paul was so moved by what he saw that he could not but speak. It is a sad thing if the Church only speaks when asked to do so. So much of our evangelism never gets beyond inviting people to come and hear what we have to say, but many people will not go inside a church. The Church must get involved in evangelistic ‘invasion’ as well as ‘invitation’; it must go out to the world with the gospel message. The early Church not only invited people to “come and hear”, but they were constantly invading new territory with the gospel.

Despite having been driven out of at least one synagogue, Paul was not afraid to go into them with his message; he argued with the religious people in what was dangerous hostile territory- the synagogues; and we will often need courage to pass the message on to our family and friends. Paul also went into the marketplace every day, speaking with the people there and we too need to learn to get alongside people where they are, for they will certainly not come to our churches!

The marketplace was where the learned philosophers of the day would have proclaimed their ideas, and so Paul would have had opportunity to

get to know the ideas and methods of the ‘opposition’. We need to learn what people think and what kind of questions they are asking. If we do not, much of our preaching will be like throwing bombs at people, and they will not listen to us- as sadly happens with much wayside evangelism. If we take the trouble to understand where they stand on a particular issue, we will be able to explain the Christian stand point, and communication will be possible. It is possible to preach well, and yet to fail to communicate; but however excellent our methods of communication, we will not be effective if we are unable to answer the deep questions people are asking.

If we are to know people’s deepest questions, we must be prepared to be involved in the real world, to read a daily paper, to use TV intelligently and with discernment. We must know how people think if we are to relate the gospel to their needs. Paul found it a joy to preach Jesus, not just a job! If it is merely a job to us, we are not likely to do it well.

## **3. Paul confronted his world**

Christians are called to be the salt of the earth, but we face the danger of isolating ourselves- of being salt in a shaker and never getting out of it and being useful. (It is true that the Bible tells us that we are to “keep [ourselves] unspotted from the world”; and it is a fact that many young Christians especially need to be more separate from the world than they are. Indeed, by throwing aside some of the taboos of the older generation, they lay themselves open to needless temptation, and so the salt loses its savour.)

It is equally possible to lose our usefulness by becoming too involved with the world; by becoming so much part of its mould that we no longer stand up for truth and righteousness. In Jesus’ words, we “become good for nothing”. Romans 12:2 warns us not to be “conformed to the world, but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds”. We are neither to be conformed to the churchy world nor to the pagan world.

Paul was treated with contemptuous superiority by the learned Greeks in the marketplace (v.18), and that is something we all find it hard to take- the sneers of those who think they know far more than we do. But being called a “babbler” did not make Paul retreat into his shell; he continued to preach unpopular truths boldly, proclaiming the resurrection of the dead as firmly at the end (v.32) as he had done at the beginning (v.18).

We will often be tempted to leave out unpopular truths- to tell people about Jesus the Saviour and Friend, but never about the Lord; to turn our evangelism into little more than concerts, and to avoid all mention of the Cross. Paul did not water down the gospel nor use under-handed ways in preach-

ing. He told his hearers that God “has fixed a day when He will judge the world in righteousness” (v.31). He was neither rude nor apologetic; although his sermon was full of God’s mercy, it also warned about God’s judgment.

Today, people are offended if we say that Christ is the only way to God the Father. Are we going to avoid this truth in our evangelism, or are we going to proclaim it faithfully and clearly?