

New Testament Evangelism Acts 17 for Today

Part 2

by Ian Hodge

V. 18. *Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.*

Stoic and Epicurean philosophies sound just like that which we hear today. This is true because there has been a revival of the kind of thought patterns that were prevalent in the ancient Greek world. The similarity arises because the human mind, when unaided by Divine Revelation, leads to the ultimate conclusions based on man's limited mental faculties. It is no wonder that the Scriptures poke fun at men when they do this: it is the ultimate in human folly to imagine that somehow man is capable of devising his own philosophical system — especially one that has coherence. Truly, "the fool has said in his heart, "There is no God" (Psa. 14:1; 53:1).

How easy it is for us at the end of the twentieth century — raised in the schools of secular humanism, taught that the faith is irrelevant to everyday life, and denied access in our education years to the facts of history — to forget that "the Bible was at the centre of medieval religious thought; it is the supreme textbook of the medieval world, essential for understanding its attitudes, its beliefs, its enthusiasm, its culture and its art."¹ This is the Christian world that the Renaissance began to replace. And apart from a small respite as "the great Christian Revolution" (to borrow the title from a recent book by Otto Scott and R.J. Rushdoony²) got under way, it soon declined when Arminianism, antinomianism, and humanism made headway against the true faith.

Today, there is no God of the Bible who controls whatever comes to pass for many Christians. It goes without saying that non-Christians think the idea totally foolish. There is no God who exists who commands all men everywhere to obey Him. There is only the physical world. It controls its own destiny.

Since man is the highest form in the mechanistic world, he is his own god. Thus, whatever he determines is right is right. Pleasure, for its own sake, is the new religion. Whether that pleasure is to be found in pornography, drugs, alcohol, fast cars, money and wealth, stealing, murder, or beating up little old ladies in the local park: The aim of modern man is self-centred pleasure. Man is thus his own god, determining for himself what is right and wrong. Beware anyone who attempts to deny this human god the pleasures of life!

If the origins of the contemporary world are to be found in Stoic and Epicurean philosophy, then the message which Paul preached on Mars Hill will almost certainly provide us with a Biblical pattern for evangelism in the modern world.

What is it that the Epicureans and Stoics believed? The Epicureans were followers of Epicurus, who lived 341-270 BC. Epicurus attempted to answer a fairly intelligent question: "What is the aim of life?" It's a pity he didn't answer it with the same amount of intelligence. According to Epicurus, the aim of life was happiness, and happiness he defined as pleasure. Epicurus wrote: "Wherefore we call pleasure the Alpha and the Omega of a blessed life. Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge every good thing . . . By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and trouble in the soul."

The Epicureans despised things such as learning and culture. We should notice that these are things that are associated with every civilisation, and no society has progressed without them. For the Epicureans, however, thinking about things disturbs the peace of mind because there are so many difficult questions to answer. Therefore, it is better to ignore them completely. In other words, they turned their minds off! They withdrew from the world.

Doesn't this remind you of the modern world? When the questions get too hard, they are avoided. When the answers lead in directions that people find objectionable, it becomes impolite to ask the questions. No wonder our modern education system is anti-education. It too teaches the children to avoid the hard and difficult questions — the very ones that provide the true meaning to life.

Can there be any doubts as to why Greek civilisation never survived? Its anti-intellectualism was certain to bring about its own destruction.

Stoicism, on the other hand, was founded by Zeon, c.294 BC at Athens. The Stoic belief was to "follow nature." Nature, or the law of Nature, they defined as "reason." This, on the surface, appears as if it is the direct opposite to Epicurus' philosophy. Here we have lip service to "reason" and its importance. But in this instance, as in Epicureanism, reason means to exalt man's intellectual powers to the highest position. Thus, man's mind becomes his own great authority.

1. Rosalind and Christopher Brooke, *Popular Religion in the Middle Ages: Western Europe 1000-1300* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), p. 130
2. Otto Scott, R.J. Rushdoony, Mark R. Rushdoony, etc, *The Great Christian Revolution* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1991). Available from F.A.C.S., \$29.95 plus \$5 post and handling.

What man thinks is true. What the mind cannot conceive is untrue. In this scheme, reason is the principle of intelligence in man, and the Divine reason immanent in the world, according to the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.

Immanence means everywhere. This is why we say in Christian theology God is immanent: He is everywhere. We should not confuse it with pantheism, the belief that God is in everything, but that He is everywhere at the same time. Many mistakenly think that the Devil is also immanent, but this is not true. Satan is a created being, and no created being partakes of the Divine attributes. So the devil cannot be blamed for many of the wrong things that we say and do! Now according to the Stoics, reason is everywhere, as if it somehow permeates the universe. They speak of it as if it has an entity of its own, as if it exists outside of the mind of man. All we need to do is somehow tap into this "reason" to be truly human.

Reason, however, is not an abstract entity. It does not "exist in itself." It has no independent existence. It is always someone's reason, or someone's view of reason which prevails. Whose view of reason is in Stoic philosophy, God's or Zeno's?

Zeno also taught that Nature is the organisation of material atoms by the operation of its own uniform and necessary laws. Again, we find nothing really new in the modern world and its rationalistic faith in the mind of man. Do we recognise the origins of the modern scientific world, according to mankind? There is no God of heaven and earth controlling whatsoever comes to pass, we are told. There are only the abstract laws of nature, which cause things to happen. Thus, predestination is transferred from God to this world; it is not denied as a concept, merely located elsewhere in the scheme of things.

Ultimately, Stoicism is fatalism. If Nature is some abstract entity that is uncontrolled by a Mind that thinks and acts, then we truly live in a world of necessity. Rather than the Person of God being the ultimate foundation of the universe, in Stoicism we are offered the inevitability of an impersonal universe governed by time and chance. What will be, will be. So say the words of a popular song of thirty (or more) years ago.

The modern world has discovered nothing new in its attempts to abandon the God of Scripture. Instead it has returned to the belief system of former epochs, blind to the fact that previously such foolish things brought about the destruction of once mighty civilisations. At least we know where our world is headed if it keeps to its present course.

Once we grasp the fact that the modern world is a rerun of the ancient pagan Greeks, we can more readily appreciate the appropriateness of St. Paul's evangelistic message for today.

V. 19-20. *And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean."*

Both the Epicureans and the Stoics believed in a world of chance. Nothing is by design, they said. Life is what you make it. And in this world of chance, why even what Paul was saying might well fit. After all, in a world of chance, the search for the ultimate meaning of life never ends. So, even these pagan Greeks would give Paul a hearing.

What were these strange things that were being taught by Paul? Given the nature of the religion of these people, it is easy for us to identify the strangeness of Paul's message: it was the absolute sovereignty of God. Notice how he develops his argument.

V. 21-22. *For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing. Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious."*

Sometimes it is difficult to tell how the emphasis should be placed on certain words in the Bible. This verse is a good example. Was the apostle being sarcastic when he said "I perceive that in all things you are very religious?" Or was he merely making an observation. We do not know for certain. But whichever way it should be emphasised, we at least know that these men were very religious. This does not mean that they were Christians. It simply means, what the Bible tells us throughout, that men never abandon religion when they abandon Christianity. All they do is drop one religion (Christianity) and replace it with another. Thus, Paul is affirming the fact that religion is inescapable. There are, after all, no atheists. Men either worship the God of the Bible or they worship another god, a false god.

Do we also detect a critical tone of the writer of this passage as he describes the people in Athens as doing nothing else but listening to new ideas. Again, it sounds familiar to us as we watch so many people today searching in magazines, the daily newspapers and the electronic media for new ideas. The old ideas were tried and failed. Now something new is needed. Always something new. Never the old things, just a rerun of new ideas that themselves are unremarkable and, in most instances, hardly original. After all, people have been doing this for well over 2,000 years, so it is hardly likely that in the twentieth century some remarkably new philosophy will be forthcoming.

V. 23. *"for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you."*

For the pagan Greeks, it was better to worship an unknown God than the God who is known throughout the whole world. For them, it was better to make an altar to the unknown God rather than to Jehovah, the God of Scripture. This is the God in whose image men are made and whose image men cannot escape unless they annihilate themselves. So, they did not want to eliminate Him entirely — but neither did they wish to give Him proper acknowledgment. Their compromise? The Unknown god.

But it was this God they were avoiding that Paul says he is going to proclaim to them. Imagine their reactions. Imagine the reaction of people today who are, as we noted earlier, in many ways like the Epicureans and the Stoics: they worship the religion of man. They are humanists.

Imagine what it would be like going down to the local hotel, or some other local meeting place to tell people about an unknown God. You know the kind of reaction that would greet you. Imagine if you used Paul's opening line, that the God these people were denying is the one that you were going to tell them about? If you can imagine what would happen in the local hotel, you have a fair idea of the laughter and derision that must have greeted St. Paul on this occasion. Yet this did not make him alter his message.

V. 24. *"God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands."*

Even worse, imagine the reaction of people when you begin to tell them about the God who made heaven and earth and them as well. This is the one fact that rebellious men do not wish to admit. Better to have a false god than admit we are made by a God who will one day hold us accountable.

But notice Paul is making sure that these pagan philosophers do not read their false religious views into his comments. His God is not the god-idea of the pagans. Most pagan religions get themselves into a knot trying to explain how the world came into existence. They have two choices: admit the God of the Bible made it, or make up some phoney story about a god who is the cause of all other causes. Not that this first cause is anything like the Personal God who demands obedience to His laws. But this false god is accepted to get them around this stumbling block that they have built for themselves.

Paul makes the point well: This is not only the God who made everything, but he is the LORD of heaven and earth, the ruler, the sovereign. In fact, He is such that He cannot be confined to man-made temples.

V. 25. *"Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things."*

Paul's words here abolish any notion of deism, the idea that God has simply started the world, like a huge clock, and let it run its due course. No, this God is the one who gives TO ALL life, breath and all things. This God is active — very active — in the universe.

These words of the great Apostle abolish any notion of deism, the idea that God has simply started the world as one would a clock, then let it run its own course. No, this God is the One who gives "to all life, breath, and all things." This God is active — very active — in the universe.

V. 26. *"And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings."*

Paul is quite adamant about this apparently unknown God — the God whom the Greeks don't want to acknowledge. His explanation of who God is does not rest with the fact that God created the world. Now he moves on to the fact that God has predetermined whatsoever comes to pass.

If there is one thing offensive to mankind it is the notion that he is not his own god. Man's revolt against God is in order to be his own god. Listen to the words of the men and women of the modern world, who have adopted the religious beliefs of these ancient Greeks. "Life is what you make it," I heard one of my staff members claim recently. "If that is true," I said, "then how did you determine who would be your parents, which country you would be born in, and on which day of the year you would be born. Did you decide to have the colour hair you have or the physical body that is yours?" My staff member was silent. He obviously had not looked at life this way. If there is one view in the world that is so patently incorrect, it is this silly notion that life is what you make of it. Nothing could be further from the truth.

But the apostle Paul is concerned that these Greeks should learn who they were, why they were living in Greece, and why they were born at this particular time in history. There was no chance in this, argues St. Paul. They were not there by chance but by the foreordination of God Almighty. He had planned it that way, and His plans were inescapable.

V. 27. *"so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us"*

Notice, however, that Paul is not teaching fatalism. Their times were appointed "so that they should seek the Lord." There are many who attempt to take the great biblical doctrine of predestination and make it into something that the Bible does not teach. They make it a kind of fatalism. Well, they argue falsely, if God has decreed whatsoever comes to pass, there's little use my doing anything to change things.

In verse 27, however, St. Paul gives us the true biblical perspective. We may not use the doctrine of predestination as a cloak to hide our responsibility. God has appointed our times in order that men and women should seek Him, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him. This is man's duty, and this is why God has created him and appointed his times and seasons: to seek after God.

Notice Paul's, comment, however. God is not far away from us, even though we think He's far away. The God of the Bible is not hidden, though He may be unseen by human sight. And what is the reason for this?

V. 28. *"for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'"*

This is it! This is the ultimate description of God's charac-

ter to a world of sinners. This God is the One without whom we would not live and move and have our being. God is the one who keeps every one of us alive. We are not kept alive simply by the forces of nature, that while our heart keeps pumping blood through this decaying body, we'll remain alive and well on planet earth. No, it is God who keeps us alive every moment.

Isn't it interesting how our modern health craze gives you the impression that you can prolong your life by following health plan A or B or C, or whatever? Do people really think that they can live beyond their appointed time? Now I'm not saying we should not look after our health. But what I am saying, on the basis of this passage, is that we must not get a false perspective about these things. It is God who determines the day of our birth and the day of our death. We cannot do anything to change this — a fact that seems to have escaped the current health craze.

V. 29. *"Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising."*

Having told us who God is and how we are utterly dependent upon him for every breath that keeps us alive, St. Paul now argues that we cannot confine God's nature and character to things made by men. This God is too big for that.

Look also at the reason here and recall Romans chapter one. In that memorable passage Paul argues that all men know that the God of the Bible exists because He is revealed in their own nature and all creation. In the Romans passage it is said that we are made in God's image. Here St. Paul describes us as being God's "offspring." Both phrases, if not identical in meaning, lay a great emphasis on the physical relationship we have with God. We are His offspring, made in His image. Since we are made in God's image all men know that this God is not a piece of gold, silver or stone. He is the Lord God Almighty, the Triune God, and Jehovah is His name.

V. 30. *"Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent."*

Here we have St Paul's challenge. These pagan Greeks are without excuse, Paul says. Deep down within their own being, being the offspring of God, they know that God exists. This is not just the *idea* of God, but all men everywhere know that the God of the Bible exists. This fact is inescapable in man, unless he can totally annihilate himself. But not even in hell can he escape this knowledge. Men and women know who the true God is. This God now commands that all men everywhere repent.

The word repent is curious to our ears. Remember, in the first part of this series I drew attention to the fact that Paul used the Scriptures — the Old Testament Scriptures — in his reasoning with the Greeks. Recall also I said that maybe there was a lesson here for us, that the problem with evangelism today is that we don't use the Old Testament in the way that the Apostle used it.

Well, here is the reason for my claim. Repentance, is turning from this to that. But Christianity is a religion of ethics. Man's ethical revolt against God brought judgement. He undertook a wrong action. Salvation is thus a moral issue. Yes, it involves Jesus's substitutionary life and death on the cross. But it involves repentance on the part of sinners. It involves turning back to God's law.

Today, a low view of the law exists because we don't understand the Old Testament. If we understood the Old Testament better we'd preach the message of judgement much better. But, generally speaking, we don't know the Old Testament very well. Consequently, we fail to understand the meaning of repentance and the place of the law in preaching such a message.

In Psalm 51:13 we see this connection between the law of God and evangelism. "Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, And sinners shall be converted to You." This is the connection between law and gospel, between law and grace.

The law of God is not opposed to grace and the idea of free salvation. Rather, it is, in the language of St. Paul in the book of Galatians, the schoolmaster which leads people to Christ.

But despite all the rhetoric about gospel preaching and the place of the law in evangelism, it has been left to a small group of Christians to reawaken the world to the glory and beauty of God's law. If there is any hope for Christianity that is to be seen in recent events, it is the revival of an understanding and application of the law of God in all its fullness and wonder. When this message is grasped and applied by larger numbers of Christians then we should expect to see the world turned upside down once again.

V. 31. *"because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."*

Look at the motivation: God has appointed a day when the world will be judged. But who is the Judge. Why, none other than Jesus. And what's the evidence that Jesus is the appointed Judge? The fact that He was raised from the dead. This is the necessary evidence, says the apostle, to show that Jesus is the One who will judge the world on that appointed day.

Again, this question of predestination. An appointed day of judgement. How men long to escape it. How they hope against hope that what the Bible says is not true? But we can be assured that the Bible is the Word of God, and that God is not a liar. Surely, there is to be a day of judgement. And who will stand without that great mediator, Jesus Christ?

V. 32. *And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this matter."*

Notice that these last three verses give us a picture of what happens whenever the true Word of God is preached. Some mocked. Others wanted to hear it again, as if repeating it might somehow convince them of its truthfulness. Still others believed, and joined a growing number of men and women, known as Christians, because they accepted the Scriptures and its view of God, and they accepted the fact that this Jesus whom Paul spoke about, had died for their sins. They understood the message of repentance, that God requires all people to live in obedience to His law. Therefore, they should turn from following other gods, other laws, and obey Him alone and trust in Him for their complete salvation.

V. 33-34. *So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.*

No mass conversions here. Some believed and some didn't. It seems that this is the ordinary course of events in the world. The occasions when great masses respond at one time to an evangelistic message are rare. This is what makes them stand out so much. In our preaching and evangelism, therefore, while we might pray and hope for the spectacular results, we should not be discouraged by small responses.

Summary

Paul's method of evangelism was aimed at a world similar to our own. Maybe we should learn to follow the pattern.

St. Paul started with the Old Testament, and moved on to the New Testament account. He was, we might say, preaching the whole Bible. He did not start, as so many do at the present time, with the gospel narratives or the Pauline epistles. He started with the great facts of Genesis, the creation of the world. Then he moved on to the message of repentance, God's law and how it teaches how we have sinned against a holy God. Only then does the Apostle move on to the New Testament story of how Jesus died and rose again from the dead in order that sinners — those who truly repent — might be saved.

Consider how much of his preaching was from the Old Testament. The greater portion of this speech recorded in Acts 17 is from great truths taught *first* in the Old Testament. The New Testament came after the Old, and then only to finish the story.

Paul challenged them with the doctrine of God. Then he challenged them to repent? How much of the law he preached we are not told. But we can be certain that he preached the law of God to these pagan Greeks.

Then, as a final topic, he preached not the modern notion that we have to have a relationship with Jesus, even though there is a certain truth about this. Rather, he goes straight to the central message of judgement. This is the message that men and women in pagan Australia need to hear. And it is the message which the contemporary church is failing to preach, by and large. Unfortunately, while judgement is mentioned on some occasions, it has so little impact because the law of God is not proclaimed in all its splendour. Consequently, sinners do *not* know just how far short of the glory of God they have fallen. Until they see just how far they have departed from God's ways they will never have a proper perspective about Jesus Christ and His work of salvation or of their impending judgement.

Often we pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." What do we mean by this? Don't we mean that we want God's kingdom to come on earth as well as heaven. And what is God's kingdom? It is an *ethical* kingdom, a kingdom that requires absolute obedience to the King.

And what is God's will? Is it not the law of God, as summarised in the Ten Commandments? It is God's will that we love Him first and our neighbour second. But love, as the Bible tells us in I John 5:3, is keeping the law of God.

"For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome."

No matter how we cut the cake, we cannot escape the fact that when the Old Testament was used in preaching, it "turned the world upside down." The challenge to each one of us today is whether we will follow the biblical pattern for evangelism or make up our own. One thing is certain, however, considering the declining influence of Christianity in our own day. We certainly are not turning the world upside down.

Perhaps, though, it's time we started?

May God help each one of us to understand His Word so that we might apply it in our day to day living — and our preaching to the world around us.