

The Gospel from Athens

Dr. Alexander Kurian

Paul's Gospel, like his theology, is God-centered. God is magnified and manifested in His Son. God and Christ work together. "Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him" (1 Cor. 8:6). This is a powerful affirmation of the equality of essence of God the Father and God the Son. The Gospel according to Paul is God-centered and Christ-centered. This is the Gospel he preached to the philosophers in Athens (Acts 17:16-34).

Theme of Paul's Message: The Unknown God

The account of Paul's address on the Areopagus is a masterpiece of cross-cultural Gospel communication. Athens was the most important cultural center of the ancient Roman world. Here Paul delivered one of his justly celebrated speeches, an apologetic for Christianity. As Paul looked around the city, he found that the Athenians were very religious (Acts 17:22).¹ Among them was an altar dedicated to 'An unknown God' (v.23). Paul would speak to them concerning this God. This was Paul's theme for his evangelistic sermon. Their superstitious religiosity was searching for a god; but Paul announced a revealed God. "What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." Paul offers a God made known, a God of specific and clear revelation. That which was unknown to them, Paul would be happy to explain.

Gospel always begins with God, and not with man. It is the Gospel of God (Rom.1:1;1Thess.2:2, 8). "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my Gospel" (2 Tim. 2:8). Gospel is God-centered and Christ-centered. Beware of the man-centered Gospel! It focuses on the fulfillment of our needs, desires, and dreams. It puts man at the center of the message. It is a therapeutic Gospel. Shun it at all costs.

Paul paid a compliment to his audience (17:22-23) as **introduction** and then he developed his **theme** ("The Unknown God") and presented it in the following **outline** form:

God as Creator

Paul started his sermon with God. The only true and the living God made the world and everything in it (v.24). He is a personal Creator God, not some random, impersonal force of evolutionary process. God is **transcendent** – above, beyond, and independent of the physical universe that He made. **God is the Source, Sovereign, and Sustainer of the universe and all it contains (v.25).**

What revolutionary words! This was a dramatic worldview to the Greeks. The Athenians have never heard of a God like Paul described. To the pagan mind, life is controlled by powers that

cannot be known or named. It is all very vague, many “unknowns” troubling their minds, yet it is powerful enough to move them to make altars to appease the “unknown.”

God of History & Geography

God is not only the **Creator of nature**, but He is also the **Creator of man and nations**. He has made from one man every nation of men to dwell on the face of the earth (v.26). Since He is the Creator of all humans, the distribution of humanity was a determination of God. God sovereignly determines where everyone fits in history and geography. He determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation (v.26). Paul’s message “affirms the historicity of Adam, and the essential unity and dignity of the human race, leaving no basis for racial superiority.”ⁱⁱ God of heaven, earth, history and geography! What an amazing God!

God of Plan and Purpose

God’s assigning the exact places and boundaries where nations should live was a benevolent plan of God so that people will seek God and find Him (v.27). God is not far from each one of us. It is we who are far from Him. But God has a plan to find them and save them. All of God’s sovereign plans are designed to prompt people to seek Him so that they may find Him.

The concept of God’s nearness and interest in us, Paul backed up by quoting from some of the Greek poets with which his audience was familiar (v.28). Paul gets at the idea that God is not only transcendent, but **immanent** – “he is present within and interacts with the world he has made. He exists outside of time and space yet is closer to you than your own breath. Since God is the sum total of all of life, it is in getting to know him intimately that you truly come to know who you are and what you were created to be.”ⁱⁱⁱ The gods of the Greeks were distant and detached from the world.

God as Father

All humans are God’s children by creation. “Being then the offspring of God” (v.28b, 29), because He is our Creator. The same sense is echoed in Mal.2:10: “Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us?”

God as Judge

Paul noted that until the full revelation of God came to the Gentiles, God overlooked sins which occurred from ignorance of His will (v.30; See Acts 14:16). Now their response is to obey God’s command to repent of their sins so God can grant them forgiveness of sins. Repentance is important because God has fixed a day in which He will judge the world (v.31). John Stott points out the three immutable facts Paul declared about this coming judgement. First, it will be universal; secondly, it will be righteous; thirdly, it will be definite, for already the day has been set and the judge has been appointed. And although the day has not yet been disclosed, the identity of the judge has been (10:42).^{iv}

Paul's reference to the resurrection of the dead ignited a reaction among them. Immortality of the soul and the transmigration of soul were familiar ideas to them. But the Greeks repudiated the idea of a bodily resurrection and personal judgment. "Paul dropped a bombshell into the concept of the universe: resurrection. The Epicureans and Stoics couldn't agree on many points, but they both declared the idea of resurrection absurd."^v

God as Savior

Paul has reached the climax of his message when he presented Jesus Christ as the Resurrected Judge, and the need for repentance. It is my feeling that there is more to this sermon. Probably Paul was interrupted at this point. Paul presented a God-centered worldview before them and the need for salvation through the resurrected Christ.

The magnificent Athenian address of the great evangelist did not bring in boatloads of converts. His reception by the polytheistic Greek philosophers was largely scornful, but a few believed (Acts 17:32-34).

Points To Ponder

What a great lesson for all who proclaim the Glorious Gospel of Christ: Don't worry about being successful; worry about being faithful. Present the God-centered Gospel – A God revealed, and a Lord risen, a God who is Savior. In place of an unknown God, a God known. God is righteous, and Christ will judge the world. Today, God summons the world to turn to Him and be saved. Let us make sure that we present the God-centered Gospel faithfully, accurately, and prayerfully. Then we must leave the results of our work in His hands.

ⁱ Though most versions translate the Greek words *deisidaimonesterous* as "very religious," to Paul it was more "superstitious." "This was a carefully chosen word.... Paul subtly implied that their deities were evil spirits or demons, not gods. Behind idols are demons" ("Acts", *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, New Testament Edition, 403).

ⁱⁱ *The Tony Evans Study Bible*, 1297.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} *The Message of Acts* (The Bible Speaks Today Series), 288.

^v Charles R. Swindoll, *Acts*, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary, 350.