

Acts shows the growth of Christianity across the Roman Empire as the good news of Christ reached beyond Jewish communities. Religion was a significant



Michael K. Olmsted

part of the world's cultural fabric and there was curiosity about a faith that portrayed a god who would die for humans and modeled compassion for even the nobodies of society.

Paul, because he was both a Pharisee and Roman citizen, found open opportunities to share Christ beyond established barriers. Luke's records Paul proclaiming Christ at the famous philosophical/religious center of Athens, Greece, and helps us understand the uniqueness of Christianity against the backdrop of traditional religious thinking that left people without any real hope.

Some modern commentators have questioned Paul's message before the Aeropagus as lacking or not strong enough. But it is Paul's knowledge of pagan beliefs, coupled with his thorough Jewish scholarship, that equipped him to present the gospel to some of the world's greatest thinkers. Celebrated philosophers, including Plato and Aristotle, had taught at the Aeropagus, but the ideas of the old religions were fading: people faced the truth that religion was more and more a business, priests were corrupt or self-serving, and offerings were little more than a bribe that enriched the religious establishment and served politicians. Paul was different: a monotheist, moral, and a voice for a loving Savior that cared about all people. The idea that God would choose to "be one with us" to the extent of dying and resurrecting did not fit the mold of common thinking.

The Gentile philosophers met daily on "Mars Hill" to discuss and rule on who would be allowed to teach and debate in public. Paul carefully presented the stark difference between the established religious pluralism and the loving gracious God, who offers the gift of eternal life that begins in the present world.

Paul opens his address respectfully with a measured idea that every person is ultimately seeking "god": "I went through

the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god" (v. 23). Paul adeptly used the latest ideas about god among those philosophers: that their pantheon of gods was shaped by a variety of needs and cultural convenience, that none of their "gods" actually lived in a temple; that the idea of one "god" or spiritual force was more plausible than the traditional pantheon of Greek mythology.

Paul deftly describes God as creator of all that is (v. 24); the God who "gives all mortals life and breath and all things" (v. 25); "he made all nations" (v. 26); "so they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him" (v. 27). The God Paul describes cannot be owned by any one race or privileged group; God cares about all the world.

The exclusive concept of God belonging to one ethnic group, nationality, denomination, territory, or any other closed group is not found in Paul's theology. Paul is strictly a "grace" man: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8, 9-13). We wonder if that gathering of worldly scholars were surprised that Paul, a Jewish Pharisee of the strictest viewpoint, was so open and accepting of them since they were Gentiles?

From the idea that all people are God's creation, Paul moves quickly to "While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (vv. 30-31). Up to this point the scholars were fascinated, but the idea of repentance and resurrection stunned the learned council. They had no clearly defined statements of morality. They recognized no resurrection from the dead. Life was the here and now. Morality was a subject for good debate, but coming back from death was a fantasy.

The common idea of loving neighbors, having moral standards, and building a good society appear in most religious and societal structures. But the teaching of Paul went beyond religious doctrines

and moral frameworks to a spiritual foundation and the resulting lifestyle. Talking about God is easy. Doctrines can be memorized. Rituals and creeds can be learned. But what about living in the present and in eternity?

Our modern world, like the culture of Athens and the Roman Empire, loved debate, treasured the history of their culture, and took pride in their accomplishments—but preferred an "altar to an unknown god" rather than a relationship with the God whose Son became one with us. Paul's conversation with those impressive scholars was not based on his desire to prove them wrong or win an argument, but to tell them God is real and Jesus is God's ultimate gift of love.

We can learn from Paul that the way to share Christ with others is to respect them, to speak and act out of compassion, rather than a desire to win an argument. Paul found common ground as his beginning, the "altar to an unknown god."

This world is a place of fear, uncertainty, struggles, grief, loss, and loneliness. "From our ancestors God made all nations" and it is only in God that "we live and move and have our being" (vv. 26, 28). The word "witness" is too often defined as a confrontation—reading Scripture, convincing a person with argument, repeating the sinner's prayer. In my experience "witness" means to build a relationship, to communicate God's love, and to share how God's grace has changed your life. Over several years many people "witnessed" to me and God used each of them to help me discover the wonderful truth that God loves me. It was their concern and love that drew me to love God back.

Paul did not fail in Athens. The city was not turned upside down. The great philosophers did not fall on their knees in repentance. But some "joined Paul and became believers, including Dionysius the Aeropagite and a woman named Damaris, and others (v. 34). Someday I hope to hear their stories in heaven and to celebrate what their lives became in the service of Christ.

The world is looking for hope. Help them find it with your example as well as your words.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.