

General Topics :: Need a sermon on Acts 17 (Paul in Athens)

Need a sermon on Acts 17 (Paul in Athens) - posted by intrcssr83 (), on: 2008/3/19 17:34

This easter weekend, my denomination will be having it's annual Oceania-region convention here in Brisbane. The topic for this year is contextualization within missions and cross-cultural communication.

To help prepare, I was wondering if anyone knew of any sermons on Paul's preaching in Athens. Expository would be preferred, but practical application is a must.

Thanks in advance!

Re: Need a sermon on Acts 17 (Paul in Athens) - posted by Jeppe (), on: 2008/3/19 18:16

Hi intrcssr83,

Art Katz wrote and preached some on this chapter.
Hope it's useful to you.

Jeppe

audio: (<https://www.sermonindex.net/modules/mydownloads/visit.php?lid13944>) FREN-12 Apostolic Foundations - Paul at Athens Note: there is a French translator

From the book: (<https://www.sermonindex.net/modules/articles/index.php?viewarticle&aid413>) Apostolic Foundations - A postolic Confrontation: Paul on Mars Hill (The Areopagus)

Paul on Mars Hill is the sacred man confronting the secular; the spiritual mind verses the worldly mind; the heavenly perspective brought to bear toward that which is earthly. It is an ultimate, classic, and eternal confrontation, and therefore every element in this text, and everything that the Spirit of God is expressing through Paul to men, is not only powerfully pertinent in that express moment, but it continues to reverberate throughout all time and history, and even to this hour. It actually might be said that it is more pungent and significant now at the conclusion of time and history, than it was two thousand years ago when Paul spoke it. The elements are the same, because nothing has changed.

But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there likewise, agitating and stirring up the crowds. And then immediately the brethren sent Paul out to go as far as the sea; and Silas and Timothy remained there. Now those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed. (Acts 17:13-15)

When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. The men, who escorted Paul, brought him to Athens, and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible (Acts 17:13-15). And so, Paul was fleeing from persecution, and while he was waiting for his colleagues to catch up with him, the Spirit of God set something in motion in his spirit. This is a pure, apostolic episode and revelation of the apostolic man, all the more beautiful and profound because it was unexpected. It was not sought for, or humanly arranged, but totally ordered of by God.

The Inception of Paul's Message

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was beholding the city full of idols (v 16).

We need to understand that this incident is as much in the intention of God as were all of the other places where Paul fo

und himself. It was all the same to Paul whether he went because he saw a vision of a Macedonian beseeching him, or he goes circumstantially in flight, or even when being taken somewhere by other men. For such a man with such a mentality, and such an apostolic consciousness and perception, nothing is by chance. Everything is in the ordination of a Sovereign God, who attends to every detail. If God has not one means to get his man to the explicit and appointed place, then He has yet another. Nothing is therefore accident; nothing is wasted; nothing is out of its time. That needs to be our consciousness also. We need to have that abiding sense of the sovereignty of God, and if we miss a plane, or some untoward thing takes place, we are not to be chafed in our spirits, or murmur under our breath, but to rejoice for the inadvertent thing that God will turn to His glory. We need to put on another mindset, and not see ourselves as victims of circumstance, even when it is ungainly or unpleasant. It was not pleasant for Paul to be in flight from persecution, and yet it is the very thing that God employed to bring His apostolic man to the appointed place and in the appointed time. Paul never lifted a finger in his own behalf, or in the promotion of his own ministry—the way we would—and yet God had him in the right place at the right time.

Paul's spirit was grieved and provoked within him as he saw the city wholly given to idolatry, and right here we have the point of inception of an apostolic event. That which is apostolic is eminently of the Spirit. It begins in the Spirit, conducted in the Spirit, and performed in the power of the Spirit, but it is in a man who sees and who grieves.

Now while he was waiting — he was beholding —

This is a man with his eyes open. He was a true worshipper of God, and that qualified him to discern the things that are false. He was not some hyper-spiritual type that kept himself aloof from the world. He saw right through the pretensions of men, because he was a man who was very much in the world, and even quotes their poets. Paul knew the world and how it thought, and he confronted it in the power of God by words that the Lord gave in the moment.

Many of us could have been in the same place, and we would have been entirely unmoved. It is not because the Spirit has ceased grieving, but because we do not have, to our shame, Paul's proximity to the Spirit. Our eyes are not beholding as God beholds, and therefore we would miss it completely. There is a pattern here that must be at the inception of every apostolic and authentic act, namely, the stirring of the Spirit in a soul that can be grieved in what he beholds with his eyes. This issue of true perception, and seeing as God sees, and seeing through outward appearances, is so imperative for the things that are apostolic.

The Essence of Idolatry

The idolatry that is present with our generation is exactly the same as the idolatry of Paul's day. Idolatry is not something that only has to do with pagan altars and shrines. We need to understand, in essence, what the whole idolatrous thing is that permeates the spirit of our age, and has been with us since the Fall of man. This was Athens, the seat of humanism and everything that the world continues to celebrate. Every present-day philosophy and mindset has a direct linkage to the philosophies of that day. Nothing has changed, except the titles — Epicureanism and Stoicism may be defunct topically speaking as philosophies, but the substance of them, what they are about, the mind-set, the self-servingness of these philosophies as alternatives to true relationship to God, still exist. Athens was a place of ultimate prominence in the civilization and glory that was Greece. Athens was known for its love of worldly wisdom, but it was a wisdom that does not make place for the true God.

So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. (v 17)

Why does it say that Paul immediately went and disputed with the Jews in the synagogue? He was moved by idolatry, and it says that he therefore confronted the Jews in the synagogue. What has that got to do with a city that is wholly given over to idolatry? How do you go from idolatry on one hand to disputing with the Jews in the synagogue? Well, the synagogue is the place where idolatry is most rampant with idolatrous substitution for the true worship of God. We might just as well add the synagogues of the Gentiles, or any religious establishment that offers to man a religion of convenience, and that requires nothing in terms of true relationship, or service to the Most High God.

Idolatry is anything that gives man a modicum of psychic and emotional satisfaction, and that produces something ethereal through the combination of organs and stained glass windows, or whatever the modern equivalent is. It lets them feel

that they have done their 'Sunday thing,' and they are now free for the golf course or the football game. That is idolatry in its very heart, and it is powerful. It is any religious substitute for the truth, the reality and the requirement of God. Idols do not require anything from their worshippers, but the Living God does: "Take up your cross and follow Me." An idol is dumb, satisfying the religious needs of men, and absolves them of the requirements of God. Even 'church attendance' can give men a sense of religious satisfaction, and save them from the radical requirement of God. It is idolatry by whatever name it is called wherever it is practiced—in the marketplace, the synagogue, or the church.

To have an apostolic heart is to have a heart that continually pounds with a jealousy for the glory of God, and cannot stand to see something that competes for the attention of men, that calls itself worship and is not. If we do not think that this kind of idolatry can even be practiced invoking the name of Jesus, then we are naive indeed. We need to see apostolically, if we are going to be employed apostolically. If Paul had not been grieved, or provoked in his spirit, there would not have been the event that followed. Paul's grief had its source in his jealousy for the love of God, the knowledge of Him, and because he knew that those, who have been seduced by an idolatrous substitute, are doomed eternally. Paul cannot stand it, and when God finds such a man, then you can be sure that that man will be brought to the place of confrontation.

And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. And some were saying, "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" Others, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; we want to know therefore what these things mean." (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.) (vv 18–21)

Ultimate Confrontation

"Spending their time doing nothing" is not only a statement of the philosophers of that generation, but also right here and now. Men are still seeking after truth, but never come to the knowledge of it. It is a phony posture that celebrates and exalts man. They presume to be seekers after truth, but never come to the knowledge of the truth. They are always in the process of seeking, and while they are yet seeking, they are fornicating and indulging themselves, never coming to the truth, but always with a self-satisfying posture that wants to hear some new thing. Do we see the desolate condition of mankind, the misspent hours, the waste, the meaninglessness of almost all of human existence in the way it perpetuates its life? Are our hearts stirred and grieved at the condition of men in the world without God? In contrast, Paul's moments were filled with eternal consequence, and what a difference!

Paul could not have asked for a more supreme opportunity to bring the message of God to men, not just any men, but men in the ultimate place of a human civilization that celebrated itself above God. Paul was the pitiful, Hebrew, itinerant servant, without credentials, or any authority that Greek philosophers would in any way respect or understand. They called him a 'babbler,' and looked upon him with complete contempt, because he was the antithesis of all that was respected and celebrated by Greek civilization. And yet they were curious, and gave him an opportunity to speak. And, therefore, whatever Paul was to say, in that place, and in that time, is eternally significant. It was born of the necessity of the moment, which in fact is the very genius of apostolic speaking. It is a revelation of what apostolic is, namely, the man is the thing in himself. Paul is the genius of what God is about, and that is why Paul is the foundation of the church. To meet an apostolic man, or to hear from a true apostle, is to be held eternally accountable. Those Athenians came as close to God as is possible on the earth, because it was the very High Priest and Apostle of our confession who was being expressed through Paul. God cannot do more for men than to put before them the apostolic testimony, and it has got to come through the flesh and blood vessel. We need to have a reverence for apostolic things, and a deep sense of what it takes for such a thing to be wrought in the earth by God in and through man.

So what does a man say when he has to stand before pagans, whose philosophy, mindset, and whole civilization are a direct offense against God? What one thing could he say to them for which they would be eternally responsible? That is what the message of Paul on Mars Hill is. It is interesting and ironic that the message did not result in revival. It did not create the church of Athens as was created, for example, in Ephesus or Corinth. There were two or three who are mentioned by name, who cleaved to Paul and believed. Why therefore does this find a prominent place in the New Testament? The word that he gave went far beyond Athens, but the fact that it took place in Athens is significant. Athens was not just the capital of Greece, in a sense, it was the capital of the whole world at that time.

We need also to understand what it means to stand in the midst of these philosophers at Mars Hill. Paul was facing everything that opposed the wisdom of God. These men whom he faced were every bit as much a representative of the kingdom of darkness and the powers of the air as, for example, a sorcerer is. They may have been clothed with philosophical garb, and spoke another kind of language that does not seem to be as alarming, yet in its nature, they were every bit as antithetical and opposed to the Kingdom of God, and the purposes of God, as witchcraft. Paul was meeting something head on, a certain spirit that prevails in the world today—especially in the religious world. When God confronts it, He is going to confront it apostolically, which is to say, foolishly!

And Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious (superstitious—King James Version) in all respects. (v 22)

What a mocking statement! If you want to get an intellectual, philosophical type mad, tell him that he is superstitious. What an indignity! They pride themselves in being above superstition, and so, by beginning with an insult, Paul is already needing them. He was a man who spoke what God gave him, nor had he any concern for the consequences of that speaking as it pertained to himself. That is apostolic, but if we are fearful, and walking and speaking in a guarded way, and calculating what we shall say so as not to offend, or be misunderstood, then how shall we be a mouth for God in confrontation with a hostile world? There is only One who can determine what is appropriate in any given moment, namely, the Lord Himself.

For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'to an unknown god.' What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. (v 23)

We will never be able to identify, or confront the thing that is false, unless we can also say with Paul, "This I proclaim to you." It is not enough to know about the truth; we need to be intensely and intimately in the Life of that truth before we dare expose the lie. Paul's statement may sound arrogant, but it is his very boldness and incisiveness that are themselves a demonstration of the God whom Paul was proclaiming. Paul taunted them with their superstitious, play-acting charade about the 'Unknown God,' as if somehow it shows a respect and reverence, when really it was a phony deceit.

Those Athenians may have worshipped their idols ignorantly, but we need to know that it was a willful ignorance. They chose to worship a god who is unknown, because an unknown god makes no requirement at all, and Paul saw right through it. The thing that sounds at face value to be so spiritual—monuments with inscriptions to the Unknown God—is in fact a phony deference that saves men from any excruciating demand of being in relationship with the God who is. They prefer that He remains unknown, but Paul will not allow them that luxury. To know God as He is, is to have a serious intrusion into your life that changes everything.

That is why my Jewish kinsmen and their Rabbis love to speak about 'a higher power' and 'an impersonal force in the universe.' It sounds so spiritual, but will we congratulate them for that kind of spirituality, or will we see how deceitful such a statement is? There is something in the human heart, not just the Jewish heart, which likes to keep God at a great distance. The human heart wants an impersonal God, because an impersonal God does not say, "Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt love the Lord Thy God with all your heart." We need to see through the deception of the human heart, and Paul was always conscious that this was an eternal moment to whereby he could not spare them. His love was too great to flatter them, and so He let them have it right in the face, because the truth is painful before it is glorious. True comfort comes after we have been discomforted.

God as Creator and Lord

He then begins his remarkable statement—a whole basis for understanding God in relationship to individuals, but equally to the nations as distinct entities in themselves. And so Paul begins with God as Creator:

The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; (v 24)

This statement could not be more fundamental. Everything rests upon God as Creator. The earth is the Lord's, and therefore He has a right over His own creation. He is not just the Creator of heaven and earth, He is the Lord of heaven and

earth. If we do not have a perception of God as Creator, we have no foundation for truth or reality. For Paul, to begin here with God as Creator, was not an accident, but a divine revelation of the foundational premise upon which everything rests: "In the beginning God created Å..."

Since He is Lord of heaven and earth, what then is the implication for the piece of earth called Athens? He is the Lord also of Athens. Paul did not say it, but it is implicit in what he is saying. He was giving more than just correct views; it was in his spirit and life, because the Creator of Paul was also his Lord. When Paul used the word Å'Lord,Å' it would have gone into the hearts of those men like a dagger. To evoke the word Å'LordÅ' can only have power and penetration to the degree that it is true for us who speak it. Paul was directly and totally under the authority of the One whom he called Lord, and the evidence was in his very speaking. If the Lord were not Lord, he would not have begun with an insult. Paul would have begun with a compliment the way most of us would, because our speaking is, for the most part, what we determine, not what He determines.

This is a beautiful portrait of what the word Å'apostolicÅ' means. It is all the more perfect because it is not self-conscious. The moment it is self-conscious, it becomes religious, and however technically it might be true, it loses its power. God is putting something before those men in Athens that was beyond philosophy and religion. It was very God Himself, because that which is apostolic is authentic, and that which is authentic is apostolic. This is the genius and beauty of apostolic, and we need to pray, therefore, that God will again give such men to the church, for until He does, we are without foundation.

God the Giver

Neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things; (v 25)

Paul is speaking in the midst of the temples, more impressive than when they stood in their original, pristine beauty. They were powerful statements of human civilization. There is something about the visible evidence of this world that is intimidating, but Paul was representing another reality that would only be verified in the eternal future, yet would seem like absolute foolishness to those who were hearing him. Paul told them that there is a God who does not need things that men make with their hands, or their monuments, as if He needed anything.

Paul had a knowledge of a God who gives all things, including his imprisonment with Silas in Philippi, in the chapter before, where they were stripped naked and beaten within an inch of their lives. It was an absolutely forsaken place, miles from their friends, yet they were there in obedience. It says that at about midnight, the darkest hour, when you give up all hope and confidence, Paul and Silas were praying and singing praises unto God.

Times of adversity and affliction are among the Å'all thingsÅ' that come from the hand of God. Can we rejoice in them, and praise God in them, and say with conviction to the unbelievers of this world, that He is the God who gives all things? That is what makes an apostle's word so penetrating. He has experienced the Å'all things,Å' and received them as coming from God's hand, and you do not have to understand Å'why.Å' We can say that there is a God who gives all things, but it will not mean anything, or have penetration, or be a challenging and compelling statement, demanding the attention of men to that God, except that we really believe it, in the sense that we are living it, and it has been tempered into our experience.

If Paul had seen his Philippian imprisonment as some kind of an unhappy circumstance, he would not have found himself on Mars Hill speaking to Greek philosophers. God is waiting for men who believe that there is a God who gives all things. Have we really surrendered to the total sovereignty of God? The evidence of that is in the way we express our disappointment. We see men as being the problem, or circumstances, or we ourselves were at fault: "If only we had done this instead of that, then something might have been changed." We do not recognize, however, that there is a Supreme God in the heavens, who gives all things. It is not an excuse for our indifference, or neglect, but we need to recognize that He is the God of all things. When we can rejoice in the sovereignty of God in the things that are painful, as well as the things that are pleasant, then we can stand before secular men and speak of the God who gives to all, life and breath. If He is the God of life, then is He not also the God of death? And if He is not the God of the one, then He is not the God of the other. If He is not God of all, then He is not God at all.

The Nations in Paul's Message

And He made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation. (v 26)

Paul is beginning to really focus in on the subject of nations. The nations are not geological accidents, but God's creation, and He has established them, and given them their boundaries. It implies that we are not to make our own boundaries. In fact, wars are about boundaries, territories and land. We do not want to be bound, because a boundary is a limitation, and we do not want to know a God who imposes and requires it. Paul is giving a cosmic view of creation and the nations, and of a God who has created them for His purpose. God does not establish boundaries and times for no reason, being a purposeful God, and He has an intention for the nations. Nations are not accidental entities, or something to be explained by anthropologists. Paul explains it in one statement: God has established the bounds of the nations. This is contrary to the freethinking of modern men; it is very restrictive, and gives no latitude for mankind to 'do his thing,' or to use this planet as if it was a toy or plaything for their purposes.

That they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His offspring.' Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. (vv 27-29)

The Purpose of Man's Existence

Paul's statement does not even sound religious. He did not quote any Scripture, and in fact, it sounds philosophical and very much like Greek thought and teaching. Paul was saying that the whole of creation, the complex, manifold civilization and world, nations and races, the formation of men themselves, and their life on earth, was for one reason only: "to seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him." This is despite every appearance to the contrary. The history of the world, its outpoured blood, its fortunes that have been dispensed, its technology, its architecture, and its institutions are only secondary things to provide sufficient stability and order for life, that men might seek after God. This view is so utterly narrow, and does not make room for anything else. It is a gush from Paul that in one short moment tells them what the whole purpose of human existence is.

Paul has reduced the whole of human existence to one pursuit only, namely, that the whole purpose of human life on this planet is for the purpose of finding God before we enter into eternity, either God-less or with Him. This is a view that has been dismissed in modern times, but needs to be restored. Paul believed it, but do we live as if we believe it? Our lives contradict our words, and if we do not live as if we believe something, then we need to understand that we do not really believe it.

The purpose of man's existence is not to seek his happiness, but to seek after God. In fact, the happiness that is to be found outside of God, and which the world is quick to provide as substitute, is delusion and deception. God is the Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, but He has not established them that we could have a fun time, pursue our careers, promote our interests, build our civilizations, or any other thing—those are secondary things.

The message that we can live and move and exist in God is unwelcome to the ears of mankind. They do not want to know of such a possibility, because they want to live and move and have their being in themselves. They do not want to be bound by their habitations according to what God has determined or fixed for the purposes for which He has appointed them. Every single syllable that came from Paul's lips is a calculated offense to the sensibilities and mindset of man. They do not want to be restricted, and therefore they prefer to have their monuments to the "Unknown God."

When Paul said, "As... this I proclaim to you," he did not say, "There is a living God." Paul was saying, "This is His nature; this is His purpose; this is His requirement." It is a declaration of God that men do not want to hear, being unwelcome and abrasive. It not only is contrary to their opinion, it altogether contradicts the whole foundation of all their believing, and the whole structure of their thought and value system. Paul is contradicting an entire way of life, and makes it invalid. This

s is so different from the temper and way in which modern believers share their own faith; they offer it more as an opinion than as a conviction.

The Purpose of Nations

"... That they should seek God ..."

For a long time I thought that the 'they' referred exclusively to individuals, and in a sense that is true, but it would be more exegetically correct to see the 'they' as referring to the nations whose boundaries, habitations and times were established by God. Paul is implying that the nations should seek God for the reason for which they were established. The failure to do so, and to have established their own purposes, without consulting God, is the very essence of what sin is. It is for this reason that God calls every man to repent, because He has chosen a day in which He will judge the world. It is a scandalous rejection of God by the world as nations, and God will judge it. That is Paul's message in Athens to the heart of nations, and therefore to all nations. Nations have an obligation toward God as nations, and that is what makes Paul's statement so profound in Athens, a city-state nation in itself, and living in complete disrespect and ignorance of the God who made it.

What is it the nations are to seek God for? It is to find out the purpose for which they have each been created as a nation, and the purpose for which their boundaries and habitations were given. The requirement of men and nations is to seek Him who is the Creator and Lord. It is a continual seeking, and because the church has been guilty of not seeking Him, we have no message for our nations. How much of our present church activity has been initiated out of ourselves, even for God's sake? We cannot blame the nations for not seeking God when many of us have not asked it for ourselves. Most of us live in complete disregard for the God who made us, and assume that whatever purposes we appoint, He must certainly approve. The great love that the church can demonstrate to their nations is to save them from the judgment of God by saying, "God has a controversy with you."

To find God is to find Him for the purpose for which we were intended. There is no finding of God, as God, nor is there any knowledge of God that is a true knowledge, independent of His revealed purpose. He is a purposeful God by very definition, or else He would not be God. To think that we have found God, and yet not to have found Him for His purpose, is not to have found God. Satan will let you think you have found God, and even give you a measure of certain subjective enjoyment and fulfillment, but the true discovery of God is the knowledge of God as the God who has purpose. And it is in the seeking of Him for that purpose that we come into the truth and depth of real relationship with God. To seek Him for the sense of His presence, which is characteristic of recent 'revival,' and not to seek Him for His purpose, is not to seek Him as He desires to be sought. Those who are merely satisfied with a measure of religion, without the power thereof, will not seek God. The true believer will seek God to find out and know the purpose for His creation. To purport to know God, and to be bereft of the knowledge of His purpose is not to know Him as God, and it betrays, and is evidence of the failure to have sought Him. The same principle applies to nations.

The Nations in Relation to Israel

God Himself has established the boundaries of the nations, and yet there is something about the nature of nation that inevitably encourages an idolatrous preoccupation to the point where it becomes very 'God.' Men worship nations, and will die for nations, and compete against nations, even in their sports. God made a provision to keep nations in certain boundaries and relationships that would be sane and healthy for them, and yet allow Him to be the recognized Head over all. There is a place for legitimacy of nations, but only within a certain structure that God Himself provided. He has made Israel central to all the nations—for the law must go forth out of Zion—or there never will be a turning of swords into ploughshares. Israel is the pivot, and nations cannot be related, and recognize the boundaries and purposes of God, independent of their recognition of, and their submission to, the centrality of Israel for all nations.

When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of man, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel. (Deuteronomy 32:8)

It is a statement in Scripture that no one ever sees or refers to, and yet it is the center of God's design for the nations. There will never be peace and justice in the world until it comes back to God's intention as at the first.

Thus says the Lord God, 'This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her.' (Ezekiel 5:5)

This is not just the issue of God's strategy and design; it is the issue of God as God. That is why men oppose it. It is not just the way in which He wants real estate to be understood, but the way in which He wants Himself to be understood, by appointing what He appoints, and choosing what He chooses. Nations want to be autonomous so that they can choose their own course, and perform their own will, in the seeking of their own glory. The very existence of Israel in the world is a stubborn reminder of a God whose will they hate. To remove Israel is to remove God's righteous demand upon them. To blot Israel out from their sight, by the liquidation of that people, is one of the reasons why Jews have suffered near annihilation in all their history. They were not innocent victims though, for their own sinful conduct justified the wrath that has been poured out upon them. Both things are true at the same time. Nations ventilating their hatred against God, and the fury that comes upon Israel, are exactly Israel's deserving in proportion to their sins—not least being their failure to desire to be chosen, and to be for God what He has always intended.

The greatest drama of the Last Days (which is already in process) is the attempt to annihilate Israel by the nations so as to remove God's very provision for their relatedness to Him. That is why the "nations rage and take thought against God and His Anointed and want to break their bands from them" (Psalm 2). If you want to be freed from the requirement of God, as a nation, in the relationship of nations to God, then you must remove the nation Israel. That explains why the last drama in history, before the Lord's coming, is the attempt again to annihilate Israel, as well as the motive for it.

The Heart of Paul's Message

Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead. (vv 30–31)

In that one statement, Paul abolishes every kind of other religion, and every kind of thing that purports to be truth, or to serve the purposes of men. He hones right in: Judgment—Resurrection—That man—a day. It was something specific, clear, unequivocal, uncompromising, sure, certain and absolute. That is apostolic love, and anything less would be a disservice to men. Can you imagine Paul telling someone to "accept Christ, and it will go well with you"? God will judge all men is a chilling totality. Whatever justification there might have been for your ignorance before, there is now no longer any excuse, because there is a people in the earth, who not only proclaim, but also demonstrate the reality of His resurrection.

God is patient, but there is a Day coming when His wrath, which has been mounting up, will be expressed. It is called the 'Day of the Lord,' and it will come against the nations of the world after He has dealt with Israel. He begins with the house of God, but no nation will be exempt from the fury of God poured out in wrath against all nations. That is why Paul is warning them in Athens. God has overlooked the times past, but now He is declaring to all men everywhere to repent, for He has appointed a day in which He will judge the world by that Man whom He has raised from the dead. Jesus is not just King of the Jews, but God's Theocratic Ruler over His entire creation³⁴ and the nations. To Him every knee will bow, to the glory of God the Father.

I can just sense the chill that came into the spine of those who heard him. They had likely never before considered that God has appointed a day in which He will judge. There is nothing more appointed for foolishness than to bear the message of judgment, especially in a world that is completely without any sense of law and order, and 'doing its own thing' in what is right in its own sight. We can measure how deep we really are in God, and how much our own hearts have been affected by that truth, by our willingness to say it to another. It is an ultimate message, announced by Jesus at the commencement of his ministry,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." (Luke 4:18–19)

He was reading from Isaiah chapter 61, but He did not complete the verse:

"And the day of vengeance of our God." (v 2)

He did not end with that verse, because it was not His task, but the final, end-time word that needs to be proclaimed, but this time by His Body, the church. The 'Day of the Lord' is at the door, and the elements shall burn with a fervent heat. We know it technically, but do we know it actually? Can we say it to Epicureans and Stoics with conviction? Paul knew God as Judge, and if we knew it to the same degree, we would not be so carnal in our behavior.

If that was the message two thousand years ago^¾that God commands all men everywhere to repent^¾what shall we say who are living now? Do we have the same sense of urgency that Paul knew? The early church was certainly not deceived into thinking that the Judge was 'at the door' and soon coming. For them the issue was not chronological, but expectation and urgency. If we are not living in this kind of dynamic, we are not the church in any true sense. This is intrinsic to any true, apostolic church, and to the degree that we do not have this sense of urgency and imminence of the things that are shortly to come to pass, then to that same degree we are not the church. Do we see this expectation as being the logic of our faith? Do we bring it to bear on our decisions? Do we plan our vacations, and where we are going next year, and the purchase of boats, as if these things are not shortly to come to pass? Do we betray, by our actual conduct, what we purport to believe?

The message of God has always been, "Repent and believe the gospel!" There is no way to believe the foolishness of the gospel by our intelligence. In God's intention, the gospel is beyond the ability of any man to understand. The natural man cannot perceive the things of God, for they are spiritual. Repenting is the key that gives the release to the supernatural grace, unobtainable through our own intellect. God commands all men everywhere to repent. Does our presence compel men? Does our speaking to men guarantee that they will be without excuse in the 'Day of Judgment'?

The Nations in the Light of Judgment

The nations are in rebellion against God, and their proliferation and increase in number is only one statement of it; their false gods are another, while their opposition to Israel is the most graphic expression of their rebellion. The Millennium, and the peace of the Millennium, pave the way for the nations to come into God's ordained formula, as it was from the beginning. Israel is at the center; the Law goes forth out of Zion. The nations come up to Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles to pay respect to the God of Israel. That is how God intended it from the first, but He has first to deal with the rebellion in His own nation, whom He has chosen, and then with the nations who are in rebellion against Him. We have not understood the magnitude of man's rebellion against God, even though they have their monuments to the 'Unknown God.' Paul understood it, and he addressed it.

Our relationship and understanding of Israel, both as a nation and even as individuals, is the evidence of whether or not we have sought God and found Him. If we say we have found God, then what have we learned about the nation Israel with regard to ourselves, not just as mere acknowledgment of that nation's centrality, but the actual and existential submission to that centrality? To have sought God, and found Him, is incompatible with being indifferent to Israel as His chosen and revealed center for all nations. Is it for the fear of such a discovery that God is not sought? Who wants to find Him if the revelation that comes with that discovery is injurious or threatening to our own self-interest?

We do not seek, because we do not want to be found. Our conduct and indifference speaks for itself. Our ignorance is willful, and the failure of nations historically to seek God has been unbelievably tragic for mankind. Wars, conflicts, devastation, and death have been the result of self-seeking, autonomous nations acting out of their ambition and rivalry for glory and fame, and who did not seek God for His purpose. The nations need to be told, which is not to say that they will listen, but if we know that judgment is coming, and we do not sound a warning, then their blood is on our hands. It is unlikely that governments will respond, but individuals hearing the message, and seeing our colossal faith and insistence upon it, will be stung in their hearts. Those who have treated the issue of God with a certain kind of casualness will now be alerted to something that for them will be salvation. This is the issue of the Last Days.

This is why the church, generally speaking, is anemic and weak. Its goals and purposes are so vain, and center in their own success and perpetuation, because it has not the apostolic setting. It has neither the overview, nor the cosmic content.

ext for which the church has been set in the earth, and no wonder that it is condemned to a vision of petty things. It is falling far beneath the glory of God, because it has not glimpsed the purpose of God.

"For behold, I am beginning to work calamity in this city which is called by My name, and shall you be completely free from punishment? You will not be free from punishment; for I am summoning a sword against all the inhabitants of the earth," declares the Lord of hosts. "Therefore you shall prophesy against them all these words, and you shall say to them, 'The Lord will roar from on high, and utter His voice from His holy habitation; He will roar mightily against His fold. He will shout like those who tread the grapes, against all the inhabitants of the earth. A clamor has come to the end of the earth, because the Lord has a controversy with the nations. He is entering into judgment with all flesh; as for the wicked, He has given them to the sword,' declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 25:29-31)

Judgment begins with the house of God, but it does not stop there. It will include "all the inhabitants of the earth."

The Day of the Lord, so central to the apostolic thinking and to the prophets, will be the epochal Day when the wrath of God will come in the time of God, and be released in a fury against the nations. It is not a twenty-four hour chronological period, but it will be a time of unspeakable devastation. That is why we read in Psalm 9 of the ruins to which the nations are brought. There are even suggestions that one third of the inhabitants of the earth will be obliterated.

At the end of history, God is preparing an apostolic entity in the earth, bearing the authority and message of Paul to the nations before the judgment promised by God falls. God cannot bring His judgment until the nations have heard the warning, and refused to regard it. The church has not performed this, and we have ourselves been so caught up at the individual level that we have not considered God's message to the nations. Paul was schooled in this, but we are not, nor do we like to hear about the judgments of God, and the Day of the Lord has no cogent meaning for us. We know it exists, and it has a familiar ring to it, but it is not central to our understanding. If it is not central, then we are not apostolic.

And with many other words he (Peter) solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!" (Acts 2:40)

Peter was addressing the individuals who had come up to Jerusalem for the high feast days, and his appeal to them was to be saved out of the judgment coming upon the nation. The Day of the Lord was at hand—the signs, the wonders in the sky, blood and fire, the sun being turned into darkness—that is what Peter preached. That which they were hearing in other tongues was what Joel promised when the Day of the Lord would come. "Be saved" is not salvation as we commonly understand it now. It was a salvation out of the judgment that is coming in wrath upon the nations, and that is the message of the Last Days. As it was at the first, so shall it be at the end. We have made salvation something much less and other than what God intended, and have missed the larger context of God's wrath exhibited toward the nations.

This message is completely at odds with the world as it sees itself. It does not perceive an end, or else they would not be building their skyscrapers. There is not even a sense of end or judgment. Yet we have got to communicate a reality that is completely at odds with what the world thinks is real. It must be communicated in such a way as to compel them to an acknowledgment of that reality so as to repent of the false reality, and to bow to the true before the fulfillment of that reality comes as judgment. To be able to convey that reality means that there has to be an imminent sense of God as Judge, and at the door, and a sense of God's wrath, by men who have opened themselves to some expression of that reality in their own lives. To omit God in His judgment is to dismiss God as God.

Do we really have a message for individuals if we have not a message for the nation? If we cannot confront the corporate sin, can we really confront the individual sin? The failure to identify sin as sin has made our evangelism so shallow, where the basis for the appeal is for the benefit one receives for believing. It goes back to the fact that we have not identified ourselves with the sins of our nations, because what is the sin of the nations but the same sin as individual men. Nothing will more enable men to see sin than in the context of the sins of their nation for which God holds them culpable and responsible. For example, the Germans are responsible for Hitler. The German nation is responsible for the sins of that nation. The people of a nation are accountable for the conduct of the nation, and God will judge them for the sins of their nation. We have not really had an effectual gospel to individuals because we have not shown them their sin in the context of their nations. Far from the message of the gospel to the nations being an alternative to the gospel to individuals, it may well be the key of the gospel to individuals. Men have a difficulty in seeing their sin as sin. That is the nature of sin; it disguises itself as not being sin. But the conduct of nations is so blatant and conspicuous, but we need to see it as the statement of ourselves—for what is a nation, but the celebration of man. There is a way in which we as individuals rationalize our sin away, but we can more readily see it in the conduct of our nations, where it is clearly seen.

We have got to be to the nations what Paul was to Athens. History is waiting before judgment comes, and that is why Paul could say that God has appointed a Day in which He will judge the world: "If you Athenian philosophers and Stoics did not know it before, then you know it now because I am telling you. You who celebrated yourself and complimented yourself for your 'spirituality' to the Unknown God need to know that God is not impressed. He sees your heart, and you are a bunch of devious phonies, always seeking after the truth and never finding it. You want to hear some new thing, and that is why you are willing to give me a hearing, not because you really want to be instructed, but because you just want a novelty. You want to continue the posture of seeking without having to find."

Resurrection—The Power of Paul's Message

"... having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."

The whole of Paul's message, and the obligation of men in the hearing of it, rests on one thing only—the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah from the dead. What gave Paul the right to demand of his hearers an eternal accountability on the basis of a doctrine of Hebrew faith for which pagans had absolutely no awareness? How could he expect them to understand the concept of resurrection when Jews themselves rejected it? His hearers had no biblical framework even to begin to understand, and yet Paul holds them accountable, and puts them under every obligation to understand it unto repentance.

Of all the articles of faith, resurrection is the one most calculated to offend against human sensibility and intellectual respectability. Paul took the one thing most offensive to their credulity, and based everything on that. For him, it was not a viewpoint to be expressed only on Sunday in a religious environment, but totally relevant in the affairs of men in the world now. There is nothing more pertinent for secular men than the subject of God, and the truths of God, despite the offense it will bring to the hearers. The apostolic mindset, which is the definitive mind of God, brings the divine view, whether it is accepted or not.

Everything that came out of Paul was incarnate in him; it was the living word. Paul did not just proclaim the message of the gospel; he was the visible demonstration of it; he was the word made flesh. Those Athenians heard a convicting word, coming out of the mouth of one who is steeped in the reality of the things which he is proclaiming. That is what made him an apostle, and to reject that witness is to reject the finest of what God can present to men; there is nothing more that God can do in His mercy—then shall the end come. They could only believe in the phenomenon of resurrection because Paul was in the resurrection. He was a man raised up out of death. His speech to the Athenians was itself a resurrection phenomenon, and not merely conceived in the religious mind of a man. It was God's very own statement given in God's very own power, and unless we, as the church, come to individuals or the governments of our nations in that power and identity, our attempts will be in vain.

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this." So Paul went out of their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also was Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them. (Acts 17:32–34)

Those who believed the message joined themselves to Paul, and believed. This is not a little chance expression; it is rich in all of its meaning. The hearers did not subscribe to some abstract gospel, they did not sign their name on the dotted line to a set of precepts. The point here is that you cannot separate the man from the message, for he was the thing in himself. He was the message, and not some abstract conveyor of a technical word of truth. There was something about the reality of his own life, something that exuded from his own spirit, which, in itself, was the demonstration. He was already a man in eternity, a citizen of heaven, and living already in the power of the age to come. It was a statement of his apostolic life, and it needs to be ours also.

Paul could have contradicted his message, even though he might have said all the right things. If the voice of his speaking, or the spirit in which it was spoken, lacked real conviction, and if he was living a life unto himself and for himself, as most Christians do, then they would have been completely unimpressed and unaffected. To believe the man is to believe the message, and to believe the message is to believe the man.

The resurrection from the dead is an absolutely supernatural phenomenon. It does not leave men any options, because it does not speak about the resurrection as a vagary; it is not a theory. Paul is speaking about an actual resurrection with

an actual Man whom God has raised from the dead, and this same Man will judge all nations. It is utterly supernatural and utterly specific, and that combination is deadly to the secular mind. They do not want to be boxed in with something so specific as this, and that is why Jesus is a 'bone in the throat' of the modern world. It means that we can no longer construct gods of our own imagining, which men love to do. But if a specific God, who in the form of a man was raised from the dead, requires your allegiance to that Resurrected Man, who is going to be the Judge, then it does not leave you any options.

"... having furnished proof to all men ..."

This is not just referring to Jews, nor the witnesses in Jerusalem, but to all men by raising Him from the dead. The reality and the power of this resurrection had got to be demonstrated right there on Mars Hill to the Greeks. For if that resurrection is not demonstrated through Paul himself, then it is only an abstract concept. Paul said that he had given proof to all men, because the very life that came out of Paul, and his speaking, were the very demonstration of a resurrected and ascended King, whose kingship, love and conviction were pouring out of that beggarly Hebrew vessel.

At the end of the age there are going to be two religious bodies, and the profound thing that separates the one from the other, and makes the one the enemy and the victim of the other, is the whole issue of the supernatural. The resurrection is eminently the issue of the supernatural. Men may squabble about the issue of virgin birth, but they cannot squabble about the issue of resurrection. It either is or it is not. It was the proof even for the unbelieving disciples of Jesus, who were "slow of heart to believe all that the prophets had written." Even when Jesus appeared to them in His resurrection body, it says that they did not believe unto joy. There is something so profoundly deep in our human nature that opposes the supernatural, that even when it is demonstrated in the person of Jesus Himself, there was unbelief. He ate before them in His resurrection body, yet their carnal minds, and the spirit of the world, were so opposed to the supernatural God that they staggered over the issue of the resurrection.

Even when we profess to believe, we do not really believe. The issue is not whether we believe technically to the correctness of the doctrine of resurrection, but do we believe to the point where we are living in the power of it? Are we willing to stand before men on Mars Hill, not on the basis of our cleverness or preparation or our ability, but His life? Is our life hidden with Christ in God? When His life is revealed, our life shall be revealed also with Him unto glory. For many years, I could not understand why there was such a painful absence of the glory of God upon the earth. There are many correct believers—moral, clean, giving no offense, living nicely prescribed lives and models of propriety—but where is the glory? The glory is only in the resurrection, and the life and power that comes when we are dead and hidden with Christ in God, until His life is revealed.

We cannot command, exploit, use or manipulate the resurrection life for our convenience. It embraces and apprehends us, and there will be times when the most glorious things will come from our mouths, statements you know that you are patently incapable of expressing. But there will be other times, in the purposes of God, where nothing will come, and you will just look like the fool, weak and powerless. You will be incapable of giving an answer, and likely become an object for the derision and reproach of men. You could have said something clever out of your own ability to get by, but you would have missed a moment for the glory of God.

Paul always preached 'Jesus and the resurrection,' which is Christ and Him Crucified. It was the supernatural faith, a basis for all of his dogma, practice and thought. There are so few believers who have attained to this faith, to this resurrection, to this reality and to this supernatural basis, which may be the reason why we do not proclaim it to men.

The Finality of Paul's Message

There is something about taking eternity into one's life in that kind of reality that brings an urgency to every human kind of deliberation. Those men will be without excuse. They not only heard, but were also encountered by the foretaste of the things to come and in which Paul was already living, and having his being. There is something about the bringing of the gospel in that kind of authority that compels men to decide for or against God; there cannot be indifference.

What are our foundations if they are not Paul's? Can we, with him, see the things that are invisible as being more impressive than the things that are temporal and seen? Athens was a mighty city, one of the great glories of the ancient world. Men quaked when they saw its glory for a first time. It took one's breath away, yet Paul walked right through it wholly

unruffled. It was the world, which was passing away, but the Word of God endures forever. There was something about Paul that made him immune to the things that are in the world, the very things that make cowards and compromisers out of us. In one moment of time, they heard from a man who had no qualification or credential from their intellectual point of view, and furthermore, it was not offered as an opinion, but a conviction. Men have no obligation to hear our opinions, but they shall be held eternally responsible for our convictions.