

## Acts 17:16-34 Evangelism in a multi-faith context

### Introduction

Put yourself in Paul's shoes, at least for a moment. Step back in time and picture the scene in Athens the best part of 2,000 years ago. It is a busy place with large crowds of people rushing around that magnificent city. A city without the pollution experienced in the modern era, instead the focus on the amazing Greek architecture of the public buildings in the city and the large ornate temples. So many gods and different religions acknowledged or worshipped by its citizens. Paul has possibly a week or two spare waiting for his friends Silas and Timothy to join him. The tourist industry and travelling for personal pleasure and interest was extremely rare and limited to a handful of wealthy people. All Paul's journeys have had one aim –only one- to share his faith in Jesus Christ with as many people as possible with a view to establishing a local church in that town or city before moving on to the next unreached community. His normal pattern was to start in a familiar place –the synagogue - where he could reason with the local believers seeking to point them to the Messiah prophesied in the various writings of the Old Testament. He will do that in Athens, but is acutely aware that the Jews were a tiny minority in that place. Open air preaching and debate with his hearers is an interesting experience as many of the locals appear to have plenty of time to stop and chat or argue about a vast range of issues. Then something completely new happens. Paul has had conversations with a series of serious philosophers, both Epicureans and Stoics, whose perspective on life and human existence was very different to his own. However, on this particular day a group of them approach him and invite him to attend a public gathering at the Areopagus. Paul, they said, you are proclaiming some new religious ideas, why don't you come and tell all our friends about your beliefs? What would your reaction have been? A. I thought you'd never ask –of course I will! B. Bleep –the thought of giving a public lecture in front of maybe a couple of hundred serious philosophers –all waiting to give me a hard time with questions afterwards – not me! Or C. Thank you Lord, You have provided the opportunity for me to take, help me do my best in this situation. Paul was on his own and acutely aware of that and so may we, but God can give us the strength to be His witnesses wherever we may be. It could be with one other person at work at a coffee break; it might be with a small group of people in a social setting; or much less likely a large group of people on a public stage as with Paul in Athens. I hope that we will say, Lord give me the words and the wisdom to be in some small way effective for You in my witness. For all of us there will be people and situations with whom and in which we expected to have chances to share our faith that never arise, but equally there will be unexpected people who ask us questions and unfamiliar places where we have a chance to explain a little of what the Lord Jesus means to us. How did Paul get on?

### **1. The Problem –a city full of idols** (Acts 17:16-21)

#### **(a) Paul's Impressions** (Acts 17:16-17)

*While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.* I am not sure whether Paul had actually planned to start a work in Athens. We know that he felt overwhelmed at the scale of the mission task in the big pagan cities of Greece.

Acts 18: 9-10 records God's words of encouragement to him when he felt like quitting Corinth, the city he would visit next after Athens. *One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent.<sup>10</sup> For I am with you, and no-one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.* Have you ever felt overwhelmed by the circumstances facing you? Silly question! Is there anyone here who hasn't done so on many occasions and in a whole range of circumstances? The in tray on the first day back at work after a break; on getting bad news in a medical report from a doctor, or maybe in a bank statement when your finances are overstretched already...or the pressure of not knowing whether you still have your job; or that family problem that has no obvious solution; or the children /parents or others for whom you pray to come to faith who show no signs of coming to Christ? In Athens the issue for Paul were the huge idols portraying the Graeco-Roman gods and goddesses. For example, the gleaming spear on the huge gold and ivory statue of Athena that could be seen, apparently, up to forty miles away. As a devout Jew he had been brought up to abhor idolatry and it hurt to see such ignorance of God's commandments. As a child of God in whom the Holy Spirit was at work it was natural that he would be moved by the sights of that city, a community with little time for the God he loved and served. Henry Martyn (1781-1812), the great Anglican missionary to Muslim Persia once stated: 'I could not endure existence if Jesus was not glorified; it would be hell to me, if he were to be always...dishonoured' [E. Padwick, *Henry Martyn*, p. 146]. Remember that poignant scene recorded in Luke 19:41-44 when Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem: *As He approached Jerusalem and saw the city, He wept over it<sup>42</sup> and said, If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace— but now it is hidden from your eyes.<sup>43</sup> The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side.<sup>44</sup> They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognise the time of God's coming to you.* We can get emotional –yes even the serious men- about a whole range of things from football (does the ref need to go to Specsavers?) to politics (how does the government cope with the deficit? Or what about tuition fees, welfare benefits, and much more?; 'Strictly come dancing' (is Anne Widdicombe really dancing?) or 'X-Factor' (does Cheryl fake her singing or are the votes for contestants always fixed?), and a whole lot more. The question is not are you passionate about something –that's like asking are you alive? What really matters to you? For Paul in Athens and Jesus in Jerusalem the thought of people entering eternity without committing their lives to the Lord caused them to weep and to pray? As a follower of Jesus there should be people whose salvation you are praying for week by week; there will be some times when you will weep before the Lord at the plight of people without Christ. At the recent Lausanne gathering in Cape Town John Piper forcefully reminded the delegates that 'Christians are concerned about all suffering in the world, but primarily about eternal suffering'. We need to plead for the power of God the Holy Spirit to come down transforming lives in our land as well as in others overseas. Paul prayed, but he also took action. Acts 17:17: *So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the market-place day by day with those who happened to be there.* It is not a particular method that God desires, but men and women who are open to God using them in a whole variety of ordinary circumstances of Life. Are you available to Him?

(b) **Philosopher's Attitudes** (Acts 17:18-21)

<sup>18</sup> *A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, What is this babbler trying to say? Others remarked, He seems to be advocating foreign gods. They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.* <sup>19</sup> *Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?<sup>20</sup> You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean.* <sup>21</sup> *(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time*

*doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.*) There were two main schools of philosophy in Athens at that time. The first group were: (i) **Epicureans** they were the intellectual followers of Epicurus (341-270BC) who taught that the gods were so remote from the world that they had no meaningful involvement in the ordinary affairs of human beings (this view had a lot of similarity with the powerful Deism movement in the eighteenth century AD in England who taught the same with respect to the one true God). Life for Epicurus was based on chance. Life evolved in the universe by chance over time and without a guiding hand continued to change throughout history. This life is all there is. When we die there is no judgement, heaven or hell –our bodies simply rot in the ground. ‘Eat drink and be merry, because you may be dead tomorrow’ – crudely summed up the views of the Epicureans. It sounds very familiar, similar to some modern ideas? As Solomon said three thousand years ago: *What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun* (Ecclesiastes 1:9). In contemporary terms life for an Epicurean might as well be one great party, better to be happy for a short time ‘having a good time’ than working hard and missing out on the fun!

(ii) **Stoics** were followers of Zeno (340-265BC) who had a vague belief in one supreme God, but he so closely identified God and the world that no meaningful contact could be made between the Creator and His creation. Life in this world for the Stoic was determined by fate and human beings should simply accept whatever fate allowed to cross their path. There is nothing you can do that can change anything or make any difference in the world. Stoics tended to be more serious and intellectually engaged, but they were convinced that life was about doing your duty; it was something to be endured, rather than enjoyed.

Representatives of these two philosophies heard Paul from their own perspectives and correctly recognised that he was teaching something different. *Some of them asked, What is this babbler trying to say? Others remarked, He seems to be advocating foreign gods. They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection* (Acts 17:18). Literally one group of hearers called Paul not a ‘babbler’, but a **seed-picker**. This is a culture-specific reference that would have been familiar to any citizen of Athens at that time. This term of disdain implied someone with confusing and incoherent ideas and was based on a character in a popular comedy, ‘The Birds’, written by the famous Greek playwright Aristophanes. To charge someone in this way was to suggest that there was no logic to their presentation and a lack of credibility in their arguments. However, other hearers in the marketplace had no difficulty comprehending Paul’s words. They were convinced that Paul was promoting a new religious that had two gods, Jesus (male) and Anastasia (female). How did they come to that conclusion? Luke reported that: *Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection* (Acts 17:18). In Greek the word for *resurrection* is in the female form Anastasia. For us when we hear this word, immediately, our minds turn to the first Easter Sunday and Jesus’ bodily resurrection from the dead. Greek philosophy denied flatly any notion of bodily resurrection. They all believed in the immortality of the soul. Any notion of having a body after this life was strongly opposed. When we grasp this it explains why there was so much confusion. In Paul’s previous major presentation to a purely Gentile audience, recorded by Luke, in Lystra, it resulted in the vast majority of his hearers thinking that he and Barnabas were (literally) two old gods come back to earth, Zeus and Hermes (Acts 14:8-20), despite saying nothing of the sort. Some Athenians guessed correctly that Paul was not advocating their old gods, but took the leap of logic to assume he was promoting two new ones! The question for you and me is this?

When we speak about our faith, however clearly, **what is it that people hear?** The fact of the matter is that our words are placed in the context of the worldview that person currently believes; it could not be any other way. However, we must not assume that a person

unfamiliar with church and the Christian faith can correctly grasp what we are saying. They may understand clearly, but many at best will only comprehend part of what we are trying to communicate. To give credit to these philosophers they wanted to give Paul a fair hearing and invited him to make a presentation in the equivalent of their debating chamber / lecture theatre, probably followed by a time of questions. Clear and effective communication with people of another worldview is hard work, even if you speak the same first language. This may be just as true with some agnostics and atheists as Muslims or Mormons.

## **2. The Solution –a call to repentance** (Acts 17:22-34)

How did Paul attempt to bridge the gulf between him and his respectful hearers?

(a) **He perceived a need** (Acts 17:22-23)

*Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.<sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.* He began where they were in an attempt to get them on side. He did not have a go at them for their superstitions and idolatry. Paul wanted to win the people more than the argument. This is a crucial distinction for all of us. Paul has also done his homework in Athens, prior to his public speaking engagements. He has noted that amongst the altars of familiar gods there was one worshipped who had no name. He took the trouble to find out why. The story relates to an earlier period of the city's history when it was suffering from the plague. Epimenides, a 6<sup>th</sup> century BC Cretan hero, was invited by Nicias, a citizen of Athens, to advise the city how to get rid of it. The Athenians assumed that a god was angry with the city and had sent the plague as a punishment to them. However, they did not have a clue which one was offended and needed urgent assistance to resolve their dilemma. On his arrival in Athens Epimenides obtained a flock of black and white sheep and released them on Mars Hill. He instructed a team of men to mark the spots where the sheep sat down –next to the altars of various gods. If a sheep sat down next to an altar he believed that the god in question was offering to assist them if a sheep was sacrificed on its altar. It is assumed that the sheep had been kept without food for a time so that in the time when they were released it was to be expected that they would rush around searching for grass, rather than sit down. A number of the sheep rested and were then offered as sacrifices on unnamed altars. The plague ceased and the city's population was delighted, but none the wiser as to which god or gods had helped them. Therefore, to be on the safe side the altars of existing gods were maintained and it appears that several others were erected 'to the unknown god', at least one of which had survived to New Testament times. In 175 BC Greek travel writer Pausanias wrote in his work, *Tour of Greece*, that he had visited Athens and reported exploring numerous temples and 'altars of the gods named Unknown' [John Stott, *Acts*, p. 284]. Greek writer Plato in his book, *Laws*, added further information about this remarkable man from Crete. He wrote: Epimenides who was revered as a prophet predicted that in ten years time from the date of his message the mighty Persian army would invade Greece and reach Athens, but return home defeated. It was a prophecy that came true. Plato also interestingly refers to Epimenides as 'an inspired man' and credits him with being 'one of the great men who helped mankind rediscover inventions lost during 'The Great Flood' [Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, pp. 9-20]. Paul had learned the history of this unusual altar and said I know the God who delivered your city from the plague. He had captured their interest in a legitimate way, enabling him to gain a hearing for the gospel.

(b) **He picked a starting point** (Acts 17:24-29)

Paul had indicated to these people that he was familiar with their culture and beliefs and by linking his message with the altar to the unknown god has engaged respectfully with their religious history prior to setting out the differences he has with their world view. (i) **God the Creator of the Universe** (Acts 17:24) *The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.* For Paul the doctrine of God as creator and His care of His creation is central to his preaching with pagan Gentiles. The apostle needed to set boundaries to explain his understanding of God and the interaction by God in the lives of the people He has made. He begins, in line with Genesis 1:1, to state, contrary to the Epicureans, that the world is not a cosmic accident that happened by blind chance, nor is God confused with His creation like the Stoics, instead the One who stands outside creation brought it into being by the word of His power. No image of Him in a place of worship is adequate to represent His likeness, nor is He dependent on us for anything. In their hearts most people know that they are not here by chance and that their life has a purpose, even if they are struggling to find it. (ii) **God the Sustainer of Life** (Acts 17:25) *And He is not served by human hands, as if He needed anything, because He Himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.* He is taking care of His world. Humanity has damaged the environment and lived in a way that undermines the self-sustaining natural resources of planet earth. The rest of creation knows its place; humanity is the one creature that has overstepped its boundaries. God, though, is not dependent on us. He has everything He needs in Himself as the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but willingly provides all that we need to enjoy a good quality of life. The more we learn of its intricate details, the less credible is any notion of our world coming into being by chance. God is active in His world and engaged with the lives of the people and other creatures He has made. The absent God or gods of the Epicureans is a pointless one; the god of the Stoics is a lifeless one; but the God of the Bible is altogether different. He is sufficient in Himself without fellowship with us, yet takes pleasure in our worship of and obedience to Him. In fact God designed the universe and in particular the planet on which we live with exactly the right conditions so that life as we know it is possible, whereas on every other planet known to us, because different conditions are found, we would be unable to live there with the ease of life on earth. (iii) **God the Ruler of the Nations** (Acts 17:26-28a) *From one man He made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.*<sup>27</sup> *God did this so that men would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.*<sup>28</sup> *'For in Him we live and move and have our being.* All humanity is descended from one original male and female ancestor—a reference to Adam and Eve—implying that racism against your relatives is absurd! How long has it taken for humanity even to begin to eradicate racism? The fact that in the past some people who claimed to be Christians could be racist is absurd. For the atheist who proclaims the survival of the fittest and the superiority of some races over others, for example, as Hitler did, is understandable. Our equality as persons before God, regardless of gender, race or social status, is proclaimed loud and clear in the Bible. Galatians 3:28 states: *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* This is why it was no accident that international aid relief efforts in disaster zones around the world began in historically Christian countries, and why to this day these countries give considerably more humanitarian aid than Muslim or Communist states. Slavery, for example, was first abolished in the British Empire, due to pressure from Christians, whereas Islam has never taught the equality of persons before God. In that context the Arab race, language and culture is superior to all others. (see Nonie Darwish, *Cruel and Usual Punishment* for a vivid description of life under sharia law) God has ordained varieties of cultures and nations for us to enjoy and

appreciate. Yet with this purpose, that we should acknowledge Him and come to put our faith and trust in Him; Paul bluntly spelt out this truth in his letter to the Romans and explained that the evidence for intelligent design by the Creator is plain to see for anyone with an open mind to see it. He wrote: *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness,<sup>19</sup> since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.<sup>20</sup> For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.<sup>21</sup> For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened (Romans 1:18-21).* However, says Paul, don't just take my word for it, one of your own scholars, Epimenides, the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC poet from Cnossos in Crete, wrote: *For in Him we live and move and have our being...Acts 17:28* (Stott, *Acts*, p.286). Another early Cretan poet, Minos, also used these words in a hymn to his father God Zeus (I.H. Marshall, *Acts*, pp.288-9). Paul in effect declares, they got it right in the sentiments they express, but not with reference to a Greek god! It is the one true God, the creator of heaven and earth who rules over the nations. Yet that is not all-

(iv) **God is the Father of Humanity** (Acts 17:28b-29) *As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'<sup>29</sup> Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone— an image made by man's design and skill. Once again Paul in that pagan context quotes not the Bible, but the works of scholars known to and respected by his audience. In this case it is Aratus, a third century BC Stoic poet from Paul's native Cilicia in Turkey, who is quoted by the apostle (an earlier Stoic poet Cleanthes also used these words, Marshall, *Acts*, p.289) to make his point that idolatry is wrong as an inanimate object cannot portray the living God. Paul in this quotation was well aware that this old Stoic poet was referring to his own god Zeus, rather than the creator of the universe God himself. However, the concept was right and he acknowledges this point and wants to point his hearers to the true God. In terms of creation we are all God's children and receive numerous natural blessings in daily life. However, in redemption God is only the father of those who have been redeemed through Christ and adopted into His family by grace alone, through faith alone. God our father has been good to us in granting all the good things we experience, but we must make a response to Him in return. Once we know of our need to trust Jesus Christ we must act upon it.*

(c) **He pointed to the solution** (Acts 17:30-33)

*He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.<sup>32</sup> When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, We want to hear you again on this subject.<sup>33</sup> At that, Paul left the Council.<sup>34</sup> A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.*

(i) **God is the Judge of all the World** (Acts 17:30-31a)<sup>30</sup> *In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent.<sup>31</sup> For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed. The person who has never heard of Jesus will not be condemned eternally for not believing in Him. Romans 2:12-16 addresses this point: All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.<sup>13</sup> For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.<sup>14</sup> (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law.<sup>15</sup> They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, **their consciences also bearing witness**, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.)<sup>16</sup> This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares. Every one will one day be judged in the light of the knowledge of God and His standards that they possessed. We cannot see into someone's heart, but God can. Paul declares that God has given us dignity and responsibilities for our*

actions in contrast to the Stoic viewpoint. God will judge all our conduct –opposing the Epicureans. In Galatians 6:9 Paul warned his readers: *Don't be misled—you cannot mock the justice of God. You will always harvest what you plant.*<sup>8</sup> *Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit* (NLV). Have you made your peace with your maker? Have you committed your life to Christ? (ii) **God is the Saviour of the World** (Acts 17: 31b-34) *He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.*<sup>32</sup> *When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, We want to hear you again on this subject.*<sup>33</sup> *At that, Paul left the Council.*<sup>34</sup> *A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.* How can we get right with God and meet Him as our saviour rather than our judge? Paul explained this in Romans 3:25-26: *God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate His justice, because in His forbearance He had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished*<sup>26</sup> — *He did it to demonstrate His justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.* Belief in a suffering Saviour who was raised from the dead challenged Greek philosophers at the core of their beliefs. For them the body was evil and something we mercifully leave behind after this life. This point was made in one of the best known of Greek writer Aeschylus, in his play 'Epimenides'. A character in that play declared: 'Once a man dies and the earth drinks up his blood, there is no resurrection.' They think its all over –but in raising Jesus from the dead, as prophesied in the Old Testament, God had the final word. I trust that He is your Lord and Saviour who will carry you beyond the grave to your eternal home, Amen.