

7 The main reason for this is simple; there is actually nothing to which the Gospel can be compared.

8 In all evangelistic preaching there must come a time when the impact of the Gospel itself has to stand alone. But the preacher's responsibility cannot be abrogated in this area. The preacher's task is to make the Gospel message

- Visible
- Intelligible
- Desirable

9 Accepting that this is the sole work of the Holy Spirit in our preaching must never allow us to forget that the means by which the Spirit does His work is through us doing ours.

(4) HIS MESSAGE HAD AN OUTCOME

1 Paul's preaching in Athens is often portrayed as his least effective evangelistic message.

2 What he wrote in 1 Cor 1:23; 2:1, 2 about being determined to know nothing except Christ crucified, has been taken as an admission of failure due to his over reliance on human wisdom. I think this criticism is too severe.

3 It was not his lack of success at Athens that cause him to repudiate the wisdom of the world. He had already done that in his embracing of the Cross in his life.

4 And besides there were some converts, so it cannot be judged a complete failure. Many of us would be delighted if we could point to such converts of this calibre.

- A member of parliament
- A distinguished high class lady
- Some others
- There was also a request for further information

Conclusion

1 What we see here represents the extent of the preacher's task and the level of work involved in being a Gospel preacher.

2 It is a far cry from the story of the person coming back from an evangelistic rally and being asked about the preacher. "He cracked a few jokes, told us how bad we were and then asked us to decide for Christ"

3 Calling people to decision based on an inadequate presentation of the Gospel usually results in false conversions.

PAUL'S PREACHING EXPERIENCE AND TECHNIQUE

(Acts 17:16-34)

Introduction

1 This is one of the NT's many examples of preaching in the marketplace. By that we mean preaching to people who have no conventional background of the God of Israel or the Christian Gospel.

2 We cannot entirely describe Paul's audience here as pagans, because they did have a religious sense. But it fell far short of the biblical revelation of the true God.

3 In ancient times the agora, the marketplace forum, was where people gathered to discuss things. Today's equivalent is the pub.

- They discussed moral issues
- They swapped religious ideas
- They explore philosophical speculations
- They gossiped about current affairs
- They argued over politics
- They analysed recent sporting events

4 The impression given at the start of the passage is that Paul was not getting his message across all that well. It is a common experience to all preachers and witnesses.

5 There seems to have been confusion over his talking about "Jesus and the resurrection". Was he trying to add two new gods to the official list of deities? A god called Jesus and his wife Anastasis?

6 It is a clear indication of the emphasis with which he declared the risen Christ.

7 he was urged to get approval from the Court of the Areopagus on Mars Hill. This was the official body that had authority over religious and moral affairs in Athens.

8 Paul, with the typical eye for an evangelistic opportunity, seizes the chance as being too good to miss.

9 We can learn a lot as preachers from how Paul tackles things here.

(1) HIS MESSAGE HAD A STRATEGY

1 He began what he had to say by identifying the problem of the ancient pagan religions and Graeco-Roman society in general.

2 He identified this as “a sort of religious vagueness and confusion” (17:23). “Men of Athens I see that in every way you are very religious/superstitious.”

- The Stoics believed in a kind of world-soul
- The Epicureans taught that the gods didn't care
- Ordinary people thought all the gods were
 - Unreliable
 - Unpredictable
 - Unapproachable

3 Paul was determined to have no such misconceptions about the God he knew and served put into the same category of thought.

4 Today's preacher has a similar task and must not only recognise it but work out a strategy to combat it.

- There are many ideas about God in circulation these days
- Most people think they are all equally valid and acceptable
- People create their own image of God using ideas picked up from various sources
- Evangelistic preaching involves removing these misconceptions

(2) HIS MESSAGE HAD A FOCUS

1 Paul's portrayal of the God he proclaimed in Jesus Christ puts an emphasis on three foundational facts.

- He made us (17:24)
- He sustains us (17:25)
- He owns us (17:28)

2 In the truest sense of the word this is a theological focus. What he has to say centres in God.

3 And notice that he actually only brings in Jesus towards the end of his address. It suggests a move in his preaching from the general to the particular. He gives the big picture before moving to the smaller details.

4 The things he says about God are only true because of what Jesus did and who Jesus is.

5 There is an incidental point to be made here too about how the whole conduct of worship can prepare people for the receiving of these God-centred truths.

6 Acts 17:24-28 constitute an excellent call to worship. They enshrine the basic facts about God that will later be proclaimed in the message.

- He is the God who made the world and everything in it
- He is the Lord of heaven and earth
- He does not live in man made buildings
- He himself gives life and breath and everything else
- In Him we live and move and have our existence

7 Charles Wesley has a hymn that captures the emphasis exactly.

“Father, in whom we live,
in whom we are and move,
Glory and power and praise receive
Of Thy creating love”

(3) HIS MESSAGE HAD A STRUCTURE

1 We must always bear in mind when reading the sermons recorded in Acts that at best they can only ever be seen as summaries and outlines.

2 But Luke's recording of them enables us to catch a glimpse of how strategy and structure work in tandem for the Gospel's sake.

3 It is obvious that Paul began where his hearers were to lead them to where he wanted them to be. He assumes as much as he can about them from his quick tour round the city, but takes nothing for granted.

4 Notice how he adopted his approach to their background.

- There are no references to Hebrew prophecies or Messianic proof texts, which were all unknown to the Athenians
- He did make use of direct quotations from the Greek poets
- He granted them some measure of religious sense

5 We do need to note, however, that his hearers may not have been impressed by his poetic quotations. The original meaning may have meant something different to them from what Paul was using it for.

6 Again, there is a helpful lesson here for us as preachers. It can be a fundamental problem knowing how to adapt the Gospel to an audience's philosophical outlook.