

Acts 17

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[0 : 00] If we could turn once again to Acts of the Apostles, chapter 17, and I'll simply read the verse 16.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

We live in interesting times for the church. We live in interesting times for science.

We live in interesting times for the global situation. We live in interesting times for mission. And my interest in sharing with you some thoughts on Acts, chapter 17, is that I see interesting parallels with the situation that Paul found himself in in Athens and the situation that I think that we find ourselves in today.

So all I'm going to be doing is looking at this situation that Paul found himself in almost by accident and drawing parallels with our situation today in the context of mission.

[1 : 37] Because I feel that there's a unique mission situation in Scotland, in the United Kingdom today, because of the multicultural and multi-religious dimension of many of our cities and many of our communities.

And it seems to me that that is going to increase. And also, when you think of the world, if you like, that Christians inhabit, I mean by that in terms of morality and values.

I mean by that in terms of our understanding of truth. I mean by that in terms of our understanding of absolute right and wrong over against the relativism that prevails outside of the church.

So it seems to me that no one has to look very far to identify a very challenging mission situation right on our doorstep.

And therefore, Acts 17 seems to me to be quite an interesting place to look for maybe some ideas and principles for our situation.

[3 : 18] The first thing that I want you to notice is simply the concern that Paul had for a culture and an environment that was full of idols.

It says that while Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

Now there's a lot of talk about this being a post-Christian country now, post-Christendom. And there are many idols, are there not, in our own situation.

There is the idol, you could say, of political correctness. And sometimes that goes mad, as we know. We hear of councils, or have heard of councils, who don't want to put a Merry Christmas on cards.

We hear of other places that don't want to put any religious symbols up in certain places. And it would appear sometimes that political correctness almost appears to be idolised.

[4 : 56] You could almost say that the idea, although it's simply a fact and there's nothing wrong with it, but one of the things about a pluralistic culture and society, and the more pluralistic it becomes, and I think that is going to be the case in both the States and in Western Europe, that societies are going to become more and more pluralistic.

In other words, they're going to have more and more religions, more and more gods, more and more ideas on truth and morality and so forth and so on.

And that tends to have a kind of a weakening influence in any claim to have a the truth.

As we hear so often from postmodern writers, one of the basic things about this whole idea of postmodernism is that we don't like what's called the meta-narrative.

We don't like any big story or big picture that seems to encompass a global and world view in a way that indicates that this is the truth over against the other stories that are competing in the marketplace.

[6 : 30] And of course, as the children said, anything can be an idol. Two very good answers from the children today.

Anything that you love more than God is an idol. It doesn't need to be made of wood or metal or stone. And anything that is worshipped other than the true God, one of the other children said, is an idol.

Too crisp and concise but very correct answers to the question that was addressed to them. And I think the challenge here is, what I'm really saying is, this is a cultural situation, a religious situation that concerns the apostle.

He's been touched with Jesus. He's felt the power of God in his life. He believes that Jesus is the truth and the way and the life.

And therefore, while he's waiting for them in Athens, he is greatly distressed to see that the city is full of idols.

[7 : 48] Are we greatly distressed to see that our culture is full of idols? Does it matter to us at all? Does it affect us? Do we feel what the apostle Paul felt?

Do we see what the apostle Paul saw? Do we see what the apostle Paul saw?

To Paul and his message. For example, in verse 18, the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers that began to dispute with him, some of them said, what is this babbling trying to say?

In other words, they didn't really have a very high opinion of the apostle Paul. And they didn't have a very high opinion of his message.

In fact, the word that is translated here, babbling, in the original, is a bit like a plagiarizer today.

[9 : 21] It's a bit like somebody who goes around stealing and pasting and cutting ideas and so on. But the important point is that they certainly did not have a high view of Paul or his message.

And is that not a bit like the situation that you and I are finding ourselves in today? That increasingly there is a contempt for robust, biblical, evangelical Christianity.

And it is an attack as much as any dispute or engagement that we are faced with.

And not only was there contempt shown for Paul's message, but there was a kind of confusion, it seems to me, as well.

Because they said that he seems to be advocating foreign gods. In other words, they thought he was polytheistic. They thought he was talking to them about a plurality of gods.

[10 : 44] Foreign gods. He seems to be advocating foreign gods. They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

Now, I think that this is an important point to pick up on. In other words, they misunderstood the message of Christianity.

Now, I have to say, I've got a lot of sympathy with people today who misunderstand the message of Christianity because there are so many different messages coming out of, if we can think in the broadest sense, of the Christian camp.

So, it's not entirely the fault of the people that they are confused. But I'll tell you what I'm thinking of more than that.

I'm thinking of we're fastly reaching a point where there are generations of people who know nothing about Christianity.

[11 : 48] That is to say, they do not have any historical baggage or ideas that they have grown up with because they've grown up with either no idea or the wrong idea.

But that is something that you and I, I believe, are going to have to think about. That when we use words, even Christian words and Christian ideas, they may well be misunderstood and misinterpreted by people today because of the cultural and philosophical situation that we find ourselves in.

Nonetheless, and this is also important, there was a curiosity for Paul's message.

They took him, it tells us in verse 19, 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.

And I think that's encouraging. It's encouraging because surely the relativism that prevails in society today cannot, we were singing in that psalm there, I think it was at 103, He, God that is, satisfies our deep desires.

[13 : 30] Surely the gods of post-modernism cannot satisfy our deep desires. Surely there's a tension and a conflict between what we feel in our soul as human beings and some of the modern paradigms of thinking.

And it seems to me that here is a ray of hope here. And this was the ray of hope for Paul. They might be confused, they might feel content for him, but there's also a curiosity. May we know. But here is the question.

In what grounds are people going to invite Christians to listen to their message today?

I was at a conference in Glasgow yesterday, a Muslim conference, and Colin Chapman was one of the speakers, and he was telling us a few stories about his engagements with Muslim people.

[14:45] And one of the stories that he was saying was that these people come from a culture where hospitality is important, and he found that it was love, it was sacrificial love, it was a reaching out to these people as individuals made in God's image rather than dispute, if you like, and philosophical engagement that opened up the ground for them, if you like, saying the same as these people said to Paul, we want to hear something about what it is that you have, that you believe, and what it is that you have to say.

And therefore, I think that there is a lesson here in terms of providing and facilitating that curiosity. Also, I want you to notice, we're thinking of the contemporary situation that Paul was in, or the contemporary attitudes that he experienced.

And I want you to notice in verse 22 there, Paul's words, based on his observation, I see that in every way you are very religious.

Now, of course, he's in Athens, there are Epicurean philosophers there and Stoic philosophers, and there's ideas there of materialism, just as there are ideas of materialism, obviously, today, and there are ideas that are against the Christian ideas.

[16:45] And yet, these people, as Paul observed, are still very religious. What we're being told today, although that people are departing from institutional churches in their thousands, nonetheless, they are still aware of a spiritual aspect to their lives.

And they aren't even wanting to explore that felt spiritual aspect, but are often exploring outwith certainly traditional or institutional Christianity.

And that, it seems to me, presents an enormous challenge for the Christian church, including the free church.

A challenge in the sense of asking ourselves, is the way that we do church serving the situation of mission today, or could we be doing church in a way that more effectively serves the situation of mission today?

So, that's the situation that Paul found himself in. But, as well as looking at his concern for the spiritual condition of his society, and the contemporary attitudes that he experienced, I finally want to draw your attention to how culturally aware the Apostle Paul was, and how he considered being culturally aware essential to his program, if you like, of mission and evangelism.

[18:58] And the first thing that we notice in terms of his cultural awareness, if we read verses, say, 22 and 23 again.

You notice that Paul says, I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship.

So, the simple question is, do you and me look carefully at the objects that people worship? in other words, have we any understanding of where people are and where people are coming from and what is informing their thinking?

Or do we just show a content for their culture and their thinking? people are asking. But it seems to me that Paul did not do that.

He didn't rush around, he walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship.

[20:24] And not only did he investigate the culture of the people that he was seeking to reach, but he also identified what I would call a connecting bridge over which he might be able to meet the culture and the people that he was trying to reach.

So that at the end of verse 23 he says, look, I even found an altar with this inscription to an unknown God.

Now, that's the bridge, that's the bridge that he uses. What you worship as something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you.

what you need and feel that you need as a human being, but are not finding in your postmodern idols, I wish to make known to you.

so, he's culturally aware, he investigates their culture, he identifies a connecting bridge that will take him in some way to meeting their culture, and furthermore, he includes their truth.

[22 : 13] He's not frightened in any way to include the truth that they have. And I think that's another important thing.

It says in verse 28, for in him we live and move and have a being. It says that some of your own poets have said, we are his offspring.

And we don't need to stand square in a kind of conflict mode with the opposite culture necessarily. It might well be if we believe and I think we should believe that all truth is God's truth and that there is truth in Islam and there is truth in many of the philosophies that are around and many of the religions that are around and that truth there's no reason for it not to be acknowledged.

So it seems to me that the apostle Paul showed the cultural awareness in those ways.

[23 : 32] As we close I want to ask two or three questions. I go back to my first question and the very first verse that we read before I started preaching the sermon.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens he was greatly distressed. Does it concern us the spiritual situation that we find ourselves in as a society today?

I also noted that they were curious enough notwithstanding the gulf between the two cultures they were curious enough to invite Paul to share his message.

Are we facilitating that invitation? So then we trust that the Lord will bless say these thoughts to us for his glory and for our good.