THE GOSPEL IN A PAGAN SOCIETY

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The first Christians lived in a very diverse environment which was very hostile to the the new, growing Christian Church. In his journeys, Paul confronted this multi-cultural environment and demonstrated that there is an intellectual and moral depth to Christianity that lifted it above the other religions of the day. When Luke came to write down his account of Paulâ€™s life in the Acts of the Apostles, he was very careful to give us models of how Paul defended the Gospel in different contexts in a pagan society.
Category: Observations

The first Christians found themselves in a similar position to the people of Israel. They were surrounded by larger, more dominant groups who all worshipped other gods. In fact, the Christians were in an even tougher situation; they didnâ€™t have a â€˜national religionâ€™ or history to fall back on. Most outsiders thought that Christians belonged to a Jewish sect. The Jews, however, wanted nothing to do with them. Meanwhile, the Roman Empire, with its ancient religion mixed with emperor worship dominated the political world while Greek philosophy and thought dominated the intellectual one.

This was the world that Paul lived in. He travelled vast distances, preaching and writing in defence of Christianity while most people followed the Roman gods. Letâ€™s take a brief look at two passages where he addresses broader religious issues: the first is a more theological piece of writing from the book of Romans and the second is a sermon he preached at the heart of the religious and cultural capital of the world.

In Romans 1:18-31, Paul looks at the question of why people follow other gods, rather than following the God of the Bible. He argues that people have no excuse for their actions because creation itself demonstrates something of Godâ€™s character. Even if people donâ€™t know all of the details about God and how he has acted in history, they know enough from what they can see and from their conscience to live moral lives. Having turned their backs on God, people become inherently stupid. When they make idols to worship, they show a lack of respect for God, but they also make fools of themselves. We are created in the image of God, so if we replace God with some sort of idol or statue, then we are reducing ourselves to the level of those idols and statues. For Paul, when you reject the creator God, you inevitably lower the status of human beings who are created in his image. In practice, this is demonstrated by the immoral lives of those who reject God and worship idols.

This section in Romans is hard-hitting and polemical. It is a short part of a much longer argument Â setting out why all people everywhere need to be reconciled to God through the death of Jesus. Crucially, Paul wrote in this way when he was addressing Christians. It is interesting to compare this with the way he spoke when he addressed a crowd of people who were not Christians.

In Acts 17:16-34 there is an account of some time that Paul spent in Athens. At this point in history, Athens was the intellectual centre of the Empire. The political power and influence was in Rome, but Athens was massively important as a centre of culture and philosophy. Wandering around the city, Paul saw an amazing array of statues and temples, some of which survive until today.Â He found this show of religion very distressing. It is important to notice that he wasnâ€™t angry. Paul didnâ€™t want to destroy the idols that he had seen, but he was upset to see people worshipping false things. His answer was to debate with the philosophers who sat around the city thinking great thoughts and being philosophical. Paul talked to them about Jesus and the resurrection. However, this confused the philosophers. They thought that Paul was introducing them to two new gods with strange

names. Nevertheless, they were interested enough to invite him to give a public lecture at a meeting of the city council.

Paulâ€™s speech to the council is well known and gives an excellent model of how to share the message of Jesus with people who have no background in Christianity. He started out by complimenting his audience; he respected them for their religion and for wanting to find out the truth. Then referring some of the sights he had seen in the city and quoting from Greek poetry, Paul showed them that the idols that the Greeks worshipped were only human creations and that the only true way to find God was through Jesus.

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The observant (or those with long memories) will recognise the title of this blog post as having been knicked from a book about Paul's sermon in Athens. What very few will recognise is that the whole post is lifted from a section on 'The Bible as the Story of Mission' from the book I've been working on for far too long now.Â