

From the 21st to the 1st Century (Presenting the Unchanging Christ to an Ever-changing Culture)

We live in strange and unusual times. Things are certainly not what they used to be. Modernity was characterized by a belief that Truth existed and that we could discover it. Postmodernism on the other hand is convinced (at least tentatively!) that truths (small “t” with an “s”) are socially or personally constructed and therefore subjective, relative and changing. There is no great story, no grand meta-narrative that explains who we are, why we are here, and where we are going. The 21st century is not much like the 20th, but it is a lot like the 1st and the world Paul effectively evangelized. In Acts 17:22-34 Paul ascended Mars Hill to engage the intellectuals of the day. In these verses we find a model for ministry to the skeptics and scoffers of our age, or for that matter, any age:

1. Start with where people are. (Vs. 22-23)

Paul initiated a point of contact by noting the fact they were religiously and spiritually minded. This is true today as well. Spiritual matters are inescapable because humans are incurably religious. We should begin where people are looking for a common point of contact.

2. Hit the creation question head on. (Vs. 24-26; cf. Romans 1)

Either God is eternal or matter is eternal. There really is no other option. Paul asserts that God made everything and that includes human beings. If He is our Creator and we are His creatures, it follows that we probably have a certain obligation to seek Him, know Him and worship Him. While He may be “THE UNKNOWN GOD” at present, He has not left Himself without a witness. That is where Paul moves next.

3. Appeal to conscience and our sense of right and wrong. (Vs. 27-30; cf. Romans 2)

Paul affirms that God is actually quite near to each of us (v. 27) and points to our spiritual sensitivities as an evidence. Interjecting the idea of repentance, he wisely draws attention to our sense of morality, something unique to humans, which sets us apart from animal creation. We intuitively, as a properly basic belief, know that terrorist acts like 9-11-01 are wrong. But why? Where does that come from? In Romans 2:15 Paul expands his answer by telling us God’s law is written on the human heart with our conscience bearing witness. Conscience shouts to our hearts there is a moral Creator.

4. Move to Christ, His cross, and His resurrection. (Vs. 31-34)

Ultimately it all comes down to Jesus. What will you do with Him? How will you respond to this man who lived a sinless life, died on a cross for sinners and rose from the dead as proof of His deity and victory? The offense to Christianity must never be in our methods and traditions. If people turn away, make sure what they are saying “no” to is a cross and an empty tomb. Some will say “no.” Paul was mocked the day he went to Mars Hill. But some will say “yes” as verse 34 wonderfully tells us. Somehow, some way, we must always get people to talk and think about Jesus: who He is and what He did.

Conclusion

Several years ago I was involved in a short-term mission trip to Thailand. While I was there a Buddhist man offered to take us on a tour of Bangkok. While we were riding around the city I began to talk with him about spiritual matters telling him I was a Christian. To my astonishment he was totally unfamiliar with the subject. I quickly began with God and creation, moved to discuss conscience and sin, and then turned to talk about Jesus, His death and resurrection. When I told Him I believed this Jewish man named Jesus who lived 2000 years ago rose from the dead he literally stopped the car and turned around (I was in the back seat) to see if he had heard me correctly. When I explained to him he had he sat silently for a few moments. Then he turned again and said words I have never forgotten, "If this Jesus truly came back to life from the dead and never died again, He would have the right to make a claim on my life and every life that no one else could." He did not become a Christian that day, but he certainly grasped the significance of the issue and what was at stake. Paul said, "if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." Whether it is the 1st or 21st century our message remains the same. It is a message God will honor any time, any place and any where. This day is a great day of evangelistic opportunity. It is our assignment to bear witness to the Truth and to pick up the pieces of broken lives, shattered dreams, and unkept promises. Jesus has always been the answer. He continues to be the answer today.