

28. Gospelling Pagans: Ancient and Modern

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[0 : 00] The passage we read there in Acts chapter 17, you'll find it helpful. A passage all about gospelling pagans, whether ancient or modern.

Now Paul's visit to Athens is surely one of the high points in the story of the Acts. And yet the extraordinary thing is that it seems to have been entirely unplanned.

And instead of continuing along the Via Ignatia westwards towards Rome, verse 14 of chapter 17 tells us that Paul had to escape from Berea by sea and thus sailed south and landed at the mighty intellectual capital of ancient Greece, the city of Athens.

Well it had been at least once such a place, but it was really, it has to be said, past its prime by the time of the first century when Paul visited.

It lost its political importance to Rome long ago, and really it was living on its past reputation as a world power. The Athenians thought a lot more of themselves than the rest of the world did any longer.

[1 : 10] I guess perhaps a bit like us in Britain today, I suppose. But in fact, Athens was a rather pitiful place. It had had all that was brilliant in the world of wisdom and learning and culture, and yet it had failed to find true satisfaction in the meaning of life.

Verse 23 of our passage really captures the irony, doesn't it? At the heart of a city full of so much culture, such a monument to human attainment, the heart of that city was an altar inscribed, as we see, to the unknown God.

Surely a tragic symbol of a culture's deep emptiness and ignorance. As one writer has said, it is a testament to the truth of Paul's assertion that the world, by its wisdom, knew not God.

He goes on to say that it was a culture whose great learning had led to much disillusion and cynicism, where people took refuge in mere cleverness, as verse 21 tells us, spending all their time simply chatting and discussing in a titillating way the latest new fad, the latest new idea.

Again, that's not so different, is it, from much of the cynicism that permeates the intellectual life of our universities and many of our centres of learning today in the West. So Athens, in a sense, is not a prime stop in Paul's plans.

[2 : 37] Proud intellectuals aren't the be-all and end-all to Paul, although they tend to think that they are themselves. And yet God does also care for such people.

The Gospel isn't just for the common man, for the simple soul, if you like, although it is very much for people like that, and often it is such people who welcome it gladly, just as Mark tells us about Christ, doesn't he?

The common people heard Jesus gladly. And God cares for these people. So Paul wanders around Athens, verse 16, taking it all in.

And there's no doubt that, in a sense, Paul would have been very much at home in the Athenian cultural beauty. He was a learned man, an intellectual, somebody with a deep appreciation of aesthetics and the arts.

He can quote the Greek poets by heart, as we'll see in verse 28. But Paul was much more than a mere estate. He wasn't on a cultural tourist holiday.

[3 : 40] And he saw something far more important than the beauty of the architecture. He saw a city that had truly lost its soul. And he saw a city full of lost souls.

As someone has put it, he saw the ultimate agony of idolatry. And this eclipsed for him every other consideration. And so he knew he had a vital mission right there, amid the tiring colonnades of the Acropolis, of the Parthenon.

And that's what summarized for us in these verses in Acts chapter 17. Now here, as everywhere, verse 18 tells us that Paul preached Jesus and the resurrection.

But whereas in the synagogue he was speaking to people with a Bible background, and he emphasizes and he tends to draw on the things that they already know well, as for example back in chapter 13 in Antioch, and no doubt that's what he did here in verse 17 on the Sabbath in the synagogue.

Nevertheless, when he's with total pagans, when he's with people with absolutely no Bible background at all, his tactics are a little different in the way he shapes his message. And we'll see that here. But notice, it still begins and ends, verse 31, with the message of Jesus and the resurrection.

[5 : 07] Don't miss that. Some people have said some very foolish things about Paul's preaching here in Acts chapter 17. But it's plain as can be that it begins and ends with the message of the risen Lord.

So what we have here that Luke has recorded for us is a lesson in proclaiming the gospel to intelligent people who have a totally non-biblical, pagan world view.

So surely there's very much here to teach us about proclaiming the true apostolic gospel to pagans, whether in the ancient world or in our pagan, non-biblical world today.

So let's look at this text then in three sections and then we'll draw some conclusions from it. First, verses 16 to 21 describe the setting for Paul's ministry in Athens and it is a pagan culture.

There are some Jews in the synagogue, says verse 17, but this is predominantly a pagan city and culture. And these are the people that Paul engages with not in church on Sunday but verse 17b in the marketplace every day.

[6 : 17] That is the Agora. Much more than merely a place where people went shopping but where the Athenians en masse traded ideas as well as goods. Where they met and talked and argued and philosophized.

I suppose in our terms today it would be like a giant Starbucks with free Wi-Fi access where everybody's in there and they're all talking together. And it really was a marketplace of competing ideas.

There were Epicureans, says verse 18, followers of the 4th century BC philosopher Epicurus. Now they were materialists. They believed that the world was simply due to the chance collision of atoms and that everything that they saw had come into being through evolution.

Yes, Charles Darwin didn't invent philosophical evolution. It goes way, way back beyond him. They did believe in the gods in a way but they believed they were so distant from the world as to have no real influence on it.

And so their whole world view was purely materialist. This is all there is. Death will end it all and there'll be no judgment. And so they were hedonists.

[7 : 28] They were living for maximum pleasure now in this world. Not really as is sometimes thought advocating sensual and sexual indulgence but seeking for tranquility, for peace, for freedom from pain, to be at ease with themselves and with the world.

Well, if you read some of our modern thinkers like Bertrand Russell, the atheist, or Richard Dawkins, you'll find actually that they have quite a lot in common with the Epicureans of Athens.

Then, second day, verse 18, there were the Stoics, followers of the thinkers Zeno.

They saw God as being what they called the soul of the world. That means they were pantheists.

They thought that God was in everything in the world and part of everything in the world.

Just like some modern day greens worship Mother Earth as though the Earth was God itself. And for them, everything that we experience in the world is therefore the will of God and therefore fate.

And for the Stoics, they believed that reason was the great principle to be worshipped. And real virtue in life was to live in line with reason. It was to accept all of these things that the world threw at them and not to resent it.

[8 : 47] That's really where our term stoical comes from. He's rather a stoical person. Well, he accepts everything as it is and doesn't complain. But for them too, for the Stoics, this world is just as good as it gets.

They had a very high sense of duty, right enough, but they had no hope for a better world. They had no hope of a coming judgment, no hope of justice and removal of evil from the world.

It just has to be accepted the way it is. And no doubt, along with them, there were plenty of others of ordinary folk who didn't particularly buy into one of these philosophies, but did perhaps treasure the art and the beauty and the aesthetics of that magnificent place, Athens, where the Elgin marbles

are still jealously fought over today, aren't they, by governments and nations and museums. It was a place of great learning, of great intellect, of great culture, but, it wasn't, it seems, a place of great openness and fair-mindedness and tolerance.

It's interesting, isn't it, how true that often is. Those who present themselves as the great free thinkers, they're often, actually, the most intolerant and close-minded of all. Just read some of the columnists in The Guardian, see.

[10:07] Think of some of the new atheists today. Well, actually, they're very, very intolerant. And so it was with the old pagans in Athens.

There was great prejudice, verse 18. What is this babbler saying? It's a very derogatory term, meant a scavenger, a gutter snipe.

Who dares to come onto our campus with this kind of claptrap? There's cultural arrogance. He's preaching some foreign gods. gods. We're not taking this rubbish from some immigrant, said the Athenians.

Who does he think we are in this country? This casual curiosity, verses 19 to 21. They're not taking him seriously, but they just think it'll be amusing for their clever minds to give him a platform, no doubt, so that they can then knock him down and scorn these strange new teachings that this idiot seems to be bringing to them.

It's very familiar, isn't it, the arrogant superiority of a culture where people think that we're so advanced that we know it all and we treat all other ways as interesting novelties, but not really with any seriousness, just contempt, prejudice, patronizing.

[11:21] It's rather like the dinner party of academics where after the dinner over the port somebody says, oh no, Freddie, do tell us, do tell us about this business of you having become a Christian.

We're all dying to know this stuff you believe. That would be an absolute hoot. Do tell us, Freddie, about this Christianity. That's the tone of these Athenian academics.

And that's the world that Paul was engaging, a pagan culture. Not an open and inquiring and intellectually honest one, but prejudiced and arrogant and superficial and very self-satisfied. And not liberated and free as it thought it was, but in fact full of idolatry. People enslaved to idolatry. They thought they were free, they thought they were masters of their own destiny, but no, they weren't, says Paul, and he could see that.

Pretty familiar, isn't it? Pagans, ancient and modern, they're not so very different. And Paul, we read in verse 16, was deeply provoked by this idolatry, provoked to anger, to grief, to indignation at the insult that all of this was to the glory of God, to the glory of the God who was the source of all this beauty and culture that he saw and yet who was ignored and trampled on by the very culture that seemed to treat him as though he didn't even exist.

[12:54] He was deeply moved. That word provoked is the word used all the way through the Old Testament of God's own reaction to idolatry in his people and in others.

Isaiah 65, verse 2 is just one example of that. And Paul is provoked not only in spirit, but he's provoked to action out of jealousy for God's holy name.

But notice, this is very important, notice what his reaction is not. He doesn't hold up his hands in horror and seek to abandon the culture and go off elsewhere and form a holy little huddle apart from this world, as some Christians through the ages have done and some still want to do today.

Nor does he go on a great idol-smashing campaign trying to destroy that idolatrous culture by force of arms. Again, what sometimes has happened in Christian history.

Nor does he organize a great prayer march all around the city of Athens to claim the ground for Jesus to the church that I was once in trying to do in the city where we were.

[14:06] All he gave us was sore feet and make us look very, very silly. Now, Paul knew that it wasn't dumb, foolish idols that needed exercising but it was foolish minds that needed exercising of their darkness and of their other.

So, what was his response to this cultural brilliance in Athens but to the total spiritual blindness? Well, verse 17. He reasoned with them.

He proclaimed, verse 18, the truth about Jesus because he knew, as he writes later in Ephesians in Ephesians 4.18 that their minds were darkened in their understanding and they were alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance in them due to their hardness of heart.

So, he proclaimed to them the unchanging gospel that began with Jesus and the resurrection, verse 18, and ended with Jesus and the resurrection, verse 31.

And he pressed home the significance of Jesus and the resurrection. In other words, Paul presented a whole gospel message to that pagan culture, nothing less as his custom always was. [15:27] But, of course, he knew he wasn't in a synagogue, he wasn't in a church where his hearers would share many of his own presuppositions about the world and the way it is. He knew that these pagans had a totally different outlook on the world, a totally different worldview from his own biblical worldview.

And so he knows that he's got to apply this gospel very carefully and tailor it to them. And that's exactly what he does in verses 22 to 28. Paul meets the pagan culture with a very powerful critique. You see, the gospel presents a total clash of reality with all pagan outlooks. So Paul has first got to demolish some of the key presuppositions of their worldview before declaring the truth of the biblical worldview to them.

He has to start by telling these proud Athenians and his whole cultural colossus of Athens, he has to begin by telling them that it's wrong and that they're wrong about life, about the universe, about absolutely everything.

Look at the introduction to his sermon in verses 22 and 23. It seems astonishing to me that some writers try to claim that what Paul is doing is trying to find points of common ground with his listeners.

[16:50] As if he's trying to say, look, look you Athenians, we've actually got an awful lot in common. Now let me just add the one little missing thing that you haven't got the name of Jesus. In fact, what Paul is doing is precisely the very opposite to that.

His opening salvo is an absolute declaration of war. I can see, he says, how very religious you are, but you're totally ignorant. That's a pretty devastating opening line for his sermon, don't you think? I don't mean he's being gratuitously rude in his tone, but he is being deliberately provocative and very dogmatic. He's not being complimentary to these Athenians.

That word religion, I see how very religious you are, it's an ambivalent word, could just as easily mean superstitious. And of course, that is precisely what it is, to have a shrine to an unknown God. Just in case, in the midst of all the others, you've missed one and he's not very pleased with you. Talk about agnostics hedging their bets. But notice, Paul, in verse 23, in fact, you are totally ignorant of God.

[18:02] That's what that word unknown means, the Greek word agnosis, it means ignorant. So when somebody says, by the way, well I'm agnostic personally about God, what they're actually saying is, well I'm ignorant about God.

So they wouldn't use that word so much if they realised what it meant. But what Paul says, is I will proclaim this God to you to dispel all your ignorance.

As we were seeing this morning, many, no doubt, then as today, see that kind of statement as the height of arrogance. How dare you say your religion is better than theirs, Paul, or mine? How can you say that?

Well, because that's not actually what Paul is saying. He's saying that yes, all religion, all man-made religion is the same and it's all folly.

Because whether it's highfalutin, philosophical religion, or whether it's lowbrow and superstitious, it's all, in the end, a total reversal of the truth. In that all religion is to do with man's creation of God in his own image.

[19:14] So of course, one is as good as bad and the other one is as valid or as invalid as any other. But Paul is not there in Athens to deal in matters of religion. He is the proclaimer, he says, of revelation.

I proclaim the truth of God to you, is what he says. The absolute truth. Not man's view of God, but God's view of man.

And it's not about man's hopes or desires from God, it's all about God's authoritative demands of man. You see, that's the first crucial place where secularists are wrong about Christianity.

The Christian message isn't about religion at all, it's about revelation. I was thinking about poor Ludwig Kennedy who died this week, you'll have seen the obituaries, an avowed secularist and atheist and campaigner for euthanasia.

He was so, so wrong. I don't know if he died, still believing these things, but one way or another, he knows his folly now. No, Christianity is revelation.

[20 : 21] It is a unique and final revelation of God to man that demolishes all the religions of man's mind. Whether it's a culturally religious religion, or whether it's a secular version of religion, it demolishes man's error and it declares God's truth.

Look at Paul's three great demolitions in verses 24 to 28. First, verse 24, he says, you pagans are wrong totally in your whole notion of deity, of God.

God doesn't live in temples made by man. God's not a creature of man, but vice versa. He's the Lord of heaven and earth and he made the world and everything in it.

Athens was full of the most magnificent temples, marvels of the ancient world. But much as their craftsmanship was astonishingly beautiful, and it was. Their thinking was astonishingly misguided. We don't make a home for God. It's God who's made a home for us. So humans can't confine God by religion. You can't localize him to one culture or to possess him by the building of the finest temples or churches for that matter.

[21 : 37] You can't do that as if by doing these things somehow you will get special access to God in a special way. Of course not. But isn't that the folly of so much religion of every flavor?

Whoever's got the grandest temple must have the grandest God. No, says Paul, that kind of thinking only demeans God totally. It doesn't exalt him, it's just self-exaltation.

And if God created the whole universe, you can't expect to locate God in the universe. You can't expect to find God, can you? By scientific inquiry.

Some scientists like Richard Dawkins and others like him talk that way. You can't find God with the empirical evidence that we see in this world. If God doesn't fit into your cosmology or your biology, well then God can't be real.

That's just idiotic, says Paul. That's just like saying, well if you can't find God in your temple, then he can't exist at all. But no, if God made the whole world, of course he must be beyond this world and above this world.

[22 : 50] He can't possibly be open to the scrutiny of the mere creatures of this created order. To say that sort of thing is rather like saying, well, if the characters inside the play Hamlet can't find the person of Shakespeare, then he can't exist.

It's just absurd. Now, says Paul, you're wrong whether you're religiously religious or whether you're secularly religious, as many people are today. You're all totally wrong in the notion of thinking about who and what God is.

He is the almighty creator of all things. You can't contain him in this world. You can't confine him in this world. He's confined us in this world. Then, second verse 25, he says, you're all wrong totally about religion.

God is not sustained by man as if we needed to keep him going. It's the very opposite. He's the one who's given life and breath and everything to all of us. But you see, the whole of human religiosity is based on the very obverse of that, isn't it?

As if God did need and want our human ministrations, endless religious offerings, endless zeal to keep the gods happy, hoping that they'll favour us. But all of that is totally unnecessary, he said Paul.

[24 : 11] God doesn't need that. It ought to be a huge relief to us, shouldn't it? God doesn't depend on our efforts for his existence. But it's also very humbling because it means all of our human activity in that way is just sheer folly.

And you see, religion like that can take on many, many forms, can't it? There is still today much of that kind of superstitious religiosity. If you look at Eastern animism or Hinduism and so on, people giving endless devotion to gods, to their idols, to their ancestors, serving them with human hands to avoid bad luck in their lives, to avoid bad karma, to win good luck and favour and prosperity in the future.

future. But many of our secular cultures are just as devoted to that kind of serving gods with our hands as we seek peace and prosperity and fulfilment and all kinds of things.

Gods of beauty, gods of body image, gods of possessions and celebrity and a thousand other things. You see, religious secularism is alive and well in our land today, all over the western world. But it's all totally wrong, says Paul, back to front. We don't need to be slaves to these unknown gods to prize their favour out of our efforts.

[25 : 36] The true God has made a home for us in this world. And he's lavished upon us everything that we need to live life to the full in it. Only we'll open our eyes.

But our pagan world doesn't see it. Nor does it see, thirdly, that it's all wrong about human purpose. Verses 26 to 28.

Paul says, all people are just the same. Whatever nationality or culture they're from, they're made, they're created, and God has ordered their lives and their times for one great purpose alone, verse 27.

What is it? That they should seek God and find him. That's why they're made. And that's a great irony, isn't it? every religion in the world invented to try and seek to bring us near to God and to find God, and yet, Paul says, the fact of the matter is God is not far from any one of us.

The evidence of his presence is everywhere. Just as Paul said to the Lystrans back in Acts chapter 14, he's never left himself without witness. The very fabric of the universe speaks of him.

[26 : 47] And even, says Paul, your own poets, your own thinkers, they recognize it, they express it. Intelligent people, you see, they instinctively deep down, they know these things. Yet, in their words and in their actions, they reject it.

Just as Paul says later on when he's writing to the church in Rome, they suppress the truth. That's the only explanation, friends, for such utter wrongheadedness in the people of this world.

It's not God who's lost, it's us who's lost, says Paul. It's not God who's far away from us, it's us whose minds and hearts are far away from God. We are indeed his offspring, but we're prodigals.

And all the foolish man-made religion in the world, it can't ever answer that need because it suppresses the real truth about God and about how we can know God.

And it suppresses the real truth about what human life is really all about. See, religion, whether you're overtly religious or whether yours is the more sophisticated secular variety, religion is all about hiding from reality.

[28 : 03] Religion is all about pretending away the real issues of our existence and living in a fantasy world where we create gods in our own image to save us, when we confuse salvation with just our own desires and our own self-expression and our own search for self-fulfillment.

It's all unreality and it's all around us. But the biblical gospel is a revelation of reality. It cuts all the way through all of that kind of pretense.

And that means that true wisdom is waking up to that reality and therefore waking up to how we come to terms with that reality. To realizing that the pagan world view is just upside down and inside out.

And we need to be turned right side up and right side in as we believe God's authoritative revelation in the message of Jesus Christ.

And in a word that's what the Bible means by repentance. Turning our false world view right side up and right way in. And that's the climax of Paul's sermon.

[29 : 20] Guys, could we have this discussion afterwards please? That's the climax of Paul's sermon. It's demolition of the wrong thinking that terms a declaration of urgent truth.

Paul wants to demolish this wrong thinking but he does not stop there. He must turn to a declaration of the truth. And so his powerful critique gives way finally to a pressing command.

He ends his sermon with three killer punches. First, verse 29, he says, your ignorance is idolatrous. You ought not to think this way.

God is not an image formed by the art and the imagination of man. Whether it's a physical image of gold or silver or stone or whether it's a mental image, whether it's a philosophy, whether it's a set of values or aspirations.

It's sheer ignorance, says Paul, and it's idolatry. It's an affront to the God who made all things. And verse 30, that idolatry is culpable.

[30 : 29] It's not innocent. In the past, God had withheld his judgment, but no longer. Now that his full and final revelation of his self has been made in Jesus Christ, in God incarnate, there is no excuse, not any longer, none at all.

Ignorance can be no defense. Because you see, ignorance in the Bible is not primarily an intellectual problem, it's a moral problem. We suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

So we are without excuse, says Paul in Romans 1. And that's what he's saying here. Such ignorance is willful idolatry. And such willful idolatry, says Paul, is culpable and therefore, thirdly, verse 31, judgment is inevitable.

He has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he has appointed. John Stott notices three certain facts about this judgment.

First, it will be universal. He'll judge the world. Second, it will be just. He will judge it in righteousness. And third, it will be definite. The day is set and the judge appointed.

[31 : 45] To that I would add that it will be personal by a man, the risen Lord Jesus. And finally, and above all, says Paul, it is imminent because of his resurrection.

That's the message of the New Testament gospel. The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ calls time on this world. Judgment has begun, says Paul, in the era of the gospel of Christ being proclaimed throughout all the world.

Because in the gospel of the risen Lord, as Paul says in Romans chapter 1, the wrath of God is being revealed now against all ungodliness of those who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

And in a nutshell, that's what sums up Paul's preaching to this pagan culture of the world, whether it's ancient or modern. Jesus is risen, he says, preaching Jesus and the resurrection, verse 18.

What does that mean? It means that judgment has begun upon all who suppress the truth and who turn reality on its head in matters of God and revelation.

[32 : 58] Moreover, he says, you are all wrong and you are culpably ignorant in your whole world view. Therefore, verse 30, you and all like you must repent because, back to where it all began, verse 31, Jesus is risen and Jesus will return to judge this whole world.

And as always, verse 32 to 34 shows us the mixed response. Some rejected it outright, some reconsidered and wanted to hear more, and others truly repented, they believed and followed them. Now, we could dwell for a long time, for many weeks, on the lessons here in Paul's preaching to Athens, and it would be great proper, but I want tonight just to point out three lessons that I think you could usefully ponder yourself about what Paul models for us in his proclamation to this holy pagan culture.

Three things that perhaps we can think about together and discuss with one another. Let's not be like the people of Athens, discussing trivia, let's discuss with one another important gospel truths. A comment about Paul's message, about his method, and finally about his motivation.

First, Paul's message demonstrates the comprehensiveness of the whole biblical gospel. What I mean by that is this.

[34 : 30] The gospel of Jesus will make no sense to total pagans unless it is a whole gospel, unless it proclaims first the doctrine of God, the one God who is creator and lord and judge of all the earth.

That's what Paul preached to the pagans in Athens. He preached a whole biblical world view we might say. And he showed how it deconstructed every other false and opposing world view.

Paul proclaimed Jesus as creator, as sustainer, as ruler, as father, as judge of all. He proclaimed to the Athenians the whole purpose of creation and above all man's place in that creation and man's folly in his fall and his need for salvation and why he needed salvation.

And then, in the light of all of that, he proclaimed the climax of the gospel message, the exaltation of the risen Lord Jesus and his summons to all people to repent.

Paul's gospel was absolutely comprehensive. It wasn't ever a trite message, come to Jesus, Jesus saves, the sort of thing you see on bumper stickers and in choruses.

[35 : 44] Read his letter to the Romans, what he calls his gospel, his three whole chapters of comprehensive demolition of every defense, of every worldview, before ever you get to the but now of that salvation from judgment in Jesus the Savior.

And our pagan worldview needs a comprehensive gospel, a whole worldview shaping challenge to the reality of people's thinking today. Let me quote John Stott, many people are rejecting our gospel today not because they perceive it to be false, but because they perceive it to be trivial.

People are looking for an integrated worldview that makes sense of all their experience. We learn from Paul that we cannot preach the gospel of Jesus without the doctrine of God, or the cross without creation, or salvation without judgment.

Today's world needs a bigger gospel, a comprehensive, fully Bible gospel must be our message to our pagan world today, just the same.

That was Paul's message. Second, his method demonstrates Paul's confidence in the life changing power of that comprehensive biblical truth.

[37 : 05] Paul truly believes that what we need to have effective mission is not the weapons of this world, either tanks or technology. As he says in 2 Corinthians 10, our weapons are not like that, but they do have divine power to demolish strongholds, to destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, to take every thought captive to obey Christ.

In other words, Paul had real confidence in a reasoned ministry of the word of God alone, to persuade men and women, to pierce the darkened intellect, to bring light, to shed it, even in the greatest minds of this world and bring them to our knowledge of the truth.

Very easy, isn't it, to be cowed by clever people, especially people much cleverer than us. But Paul wasn't. Enormous we. Because the gospel is reasonable.

It's true and it's coherent and it is convincing to open-minded people. Notice three things he does. He presses home, doesn't he, the logic of his method.

Because the gospel is intellectually coherent. Whereas their worldview was deeply incoherent.

They knew and their writers and thinkers expressed that God was big and can't be contained on earth.

[38 : 31] So why on earth are they building shrines and temples as though he did? They're living inconsistently with what they say they believe, as pagan people always are. There's so much of that inevitably in non-Christian culture.

And we need to show up the illogic of it. Just as we were saying this morning, the example of the secularist who dismisses religion as all being culturally conditioned.

He says, oh, well, if you were born in Pakistan or wherever, you wouldn't be a Christian. Well, his own view is just as culturally conditioned. He's being utterly illogical in what he's saying in that argument.

Or people like Bertrand Russell and like the other Epicureans who were saying, oh, well, the world is all just chance banging together of atoms. That's why everything exists. Well, Bertrand Russell said so. So is every thought of your mind just a chance banging together of atoms.

Why should I listen to a word you say? Illogic. But by contrast, the Christian gospel is intellectually coherent.

[39 : 33] So don't be afraid. Press home the logic of a biblical worldview. Show how it demolishes the illogic of so many other, indeed every other worldview.

But it's not just the intellect. Paul presses home human experience in his preaching because the gospel is existentially consistent. In other words, it makes sense of the world and our experience of this world.

We are made to seek God. And that's exactly what people are doing all over the world. Everywhere in the human heart is what C.S. Lewis calls that inconsolable longing.

Longing for more. Longing for a better world. Longing for something more than the mess of this world because deep down we know it oughtn't to be this way. And the Greek poets were full of that longing as Paul pointed out.

So are so many of them. The romantic poets, the romantic musicians just listened to the haunting searching in Rachmaninoff or Tchaikovsky or so many of the others. Why so?

[40 : 36] Because we are all indeed his offspring. We're made for God and we will never find fulfillment as beings without him. And the gospel is existentially consistent.

It makes sense of everything that we feel and experience. So we need to press that home in our pagan culture. That ignorant but very real longing deep in every human heart is something that we can proclaim to people in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And thirdly, Paul presses home the evidence for his message because the gospel is historically confirmable. Always he returns, doesn't he, to the historical fact of the real Jesus of history who lived and died and rose again and was seen.

And you see the fact of the resurrection in history confirms the foretelling of it in scripture. And indeed the whole biblical significance of the risen and the exalted Son of God in terms of Psalm 2 and Psalm 110 and Daniel 7 and so on.

The exalted Lord Jesus who is Lord of heaven and earth. See what Paul is saying? This message is not hokum. It's history. It's confirmable both on the pages of scripture going back thousands of years and in the witness facts of history by the eyes and the ears and the hands of men and women who saw him and heard him and touched him after he rose from the dead.

[42 : 10] So we mustn't be intimidated. Our method can display the confidence of a message that is coherent intellectually, that's consistent with human experience and that is confirmable historically.

And our gospel can and it will destroy falsehoods and it will bring every thought captive to obey Christ even in the modern day Athens of our world, in our universities, in our seats of learning and of culture and of politics and of the arts.

Last, Paul's motivation. His message was the true comprehensiveness of a fully biblical gospel. His method was a deep confidence in the power of that gospel. But his chief motivation was deep concern for the glorious name of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.

As we were saying this morning, for Paul, his mission existed because worship didn't. He saw the sheer ugliness and the horror and the blasphemy of human idolatry and he was deeply moved with jealousy for the glory and the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[43 : 33] I can't express it nearly as well so I'm going to close with some words from John Stott. Why is it that despite the great needs and opportunities of our day, the church slumbers peacefully on and that so many Christians are deaf and dumb, deaf to Christ's commission and tongue tied in testimony?

I think the major reason is this. We do not speak as Paul spoke because we do not feel as Paul felt. We have never had the paroxysm of indignation which he had.

Divine jealousy is not stirred within us. In Athens, Paul looked and looked and thought and thought until the fires of holy imagination were kindled within him for he saw men and women created by God in the image of God giving to idols the homage that was due to him alone.

Idols are not limited to primitive societies. There are many sophisticated idols too. An idol is a God substitute. Any person or thing that occupies the place where God should occupy is an idol.

Covetousness is idolatry. Ideologies can be idolatries. So can fame, wealth and power, sex, food, alcohol and other drugs, parents, spouse, children and friends, work, recreation, television and possessions, even church, religion and Christian service.

[45 : 00] Idols always seem particularly dominant in cities. Jesus wept over the impenitent city of Jerusalem.

Paul was deeply pained by the idolatrous city of Athens. Have you ever been provoked by the idolatrous cities of our contemporary world?

Well, in the end, friends, that motivation alone is what can empower someone to face a totally pagan culture with all its hostility and declare faithfully in the gospel of the risen Lord a powerful critique of all its darkened thinking and issue that pressing command to repent, to worship the one true and living God through Christ alone now before it's too late.

We'll never speak as Paul spoke until we feel as Paul felt about the honor of our Lord Jesus Christ. Well, let's pray. Lord, we pray that you would give us eyes to see all that sets itself up as an affront to your glorious majesty.

[46 : 37] We also might see and feel and speak the glorious saving message of our Lord Jesus Christ in our city, in our time.

Amen.