

Paul as Model for Evangelism

Salisbury, 50 minutes, Feb, 2019

Introduction

Now, I hope that first session was helpful. We addressed:

- What it might look like to start conversations
- How to go deeper in conversation
- How apologetics serves evangelism
- What holds us back from evangelism.

But there's more that can be said about these things. And we're going to draw them out in this session.

Now, I haven't had the chance to speak with a number of you. But, I'm guessing we all have different motivations for being here. Some of you are leaders, others of you are armchair theologians, others of you just genuinely care about your neighbour and you want to put all types of tools on your belt to help you share Jesus with them.

I would guess that one of the common reasons we are here is because we want to do evangelism, and we want to do it in a way that engages with some of the important questions our culture is asking.

See, we live in a fascinating cultural moment. One of the ironies of our time is that there seem to be more questions on the table. With the influx of immigration, trade agreements, globalisation, and the internet, all of us now are more aware of different views of the world and the different types of answers people give to those questions.

Which means, for the church in our day, every type of question and every type of questioner is on our doorstep. And if we want to be able to fulfil that great commission – be those who pass on that which we received, the hope we have – we need to be able to engage this cultural moment.

The fascinating thing about this is that just in the last few weeks, Barna research group released a study revealing that evangelism is at an all-time-low for millennials and possibly iGen.

The survey found that almost all practicing Christians believe that part of their faith means being a witness about Jesus (ranging from 95% to 97% among all generational groups), and that the best thing that could ever happen to someone is for them to know Jesus (94% to 97%). Millennials in particular feel equipped to share their faith with others.

Now, millennials are the 20's-30's in our midst. And despite feeling incredibly equipped, the survey found that almost half of Millennials (47%) agree that it is wrong to share one's personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will one day share the same faith. This is compared to a little over one-quarter of Gen X (27%), and one in five Boomers (19%) and Elders (20%).

One of the reasons posited – though not perfectly confirmed – is that, in the mind of this generation, evangelism brings with it the imagery of tent-tours, Billy Graham, and a type of conviction which, if

held, is said to seem more ugly than attractive. Many people think that evangelism is outdated and old-school and even bigoted.

One of the common beliefs is that which has commonly been misattributed to Francis of Assisi: "Preach the Gospel at all times – if necessary, use words."

Now, there's something fundamentally positive about this, and it's a point I want to bring to your attention before I critique it. The positive is that it takes character seriously. And the Bible takes character seriously.

In fact, one of the assumptions made by the injunction from Peter's passage is that character and the love of love you live is the very thing that will cause people to ask you questions.

See, there is every possibility that we can spend our lives here as Christians and never have a non-Christian ask us a question. Why? Well, on one level, because we might not do life with non-Christians. That's easy to fix – GO.

The other reason could be that we have failed to notice the context in which being prepared to give an answer for the faith comes. One thing we often fail to notice is that this injunction to give a defence for the faith is sandwiched in a book which is dedicated to the imperative to pursue holiness. Chapter one is about pursuing holiness, chapter two is about the treatment of slaves and family members. And chapter three is about suffering with perseverance for the glory of God. And *then* the injunction comes.

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

The lesson is incredible. The New Testament assumes that people will ask you questions about your faith when they see it working. And there's our goal: live such a life that people ask you questions to which only the gospel is the answer. Because, ultimately, if people don't see Jesus in your person, they won't be convinced by your preaching. Why? Because we preach a life-changing message, which means we need be life-changed people.

I don't want to sit here for too long, but I can't make this point without reading you something of a case-study from the second-century. There's a letter, called the letter of Diognetus. We don't know much about it, other than that it survived, and that it's the writing of a non-Christian to someone in authority, describing what came to be known as this new Christian movement. Hear this:

They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all others; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death and restored to life. They are poor yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things and yet abound in all; they are dishonored and yet in their very dishonor are glorified. They are

evil spoken of and yet are justified; they are reviled and bless; they are insulted and repay the insult with honor; they do good yet are punished as evildoers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred. To sum it all up in one word -- what the soul is to the body, that are Christians in the world.

Now, what a vision for life. But, this would be incredibly naïve if that's all we thought was necessary. No, our lives are meant to prompt questions, not admiration. Character evidence the hope we have; but evangelism – sharing Jesus with people – invites people to the hope we have. We need both.

And I think that brings us to the apostle Paul. We're going to look at a text which has, for centuries, informed the church about evangelism. That text is Acts 17 and Paul's discourse in front of the Areopagus.

Now, this text is fascinating. Some contemporary scholars question the legitimacy of viewing this text as a model for evangelism. Others see it as the *best* model of evangelism. Both are wrong. Why? Well, this is just *one of three* evangelistic engagements that Paul has in Acts where the speech is fully recorded. And each speech is different.

- The first speech is to Jews and God-fearers (Psidian Antioch, ch. 13).
- The second is to illiterate pagans (Lystra, ch. 14).
- The third speech is to cultured philosophers (Athens, ch. 17).

This speech is the third speech. And I think that means we can learn two things:

1. Paul was versatile. That's key.

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²²To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

2. Though this passage is not the only one containing Paul's speech, it is the most *relevant*. It's Paul, engaging people in a pretty unique way which has a lot of bearing on how we should think about ourselves in our current cultural moment.

a. Approaching Acts 17

So, before we get into the text, let me just set the scene: Luke's Gospel finishes with Jesus' words to the disciples, "You will be my witnesses" (24:48). Acts 1 picks that up, recording again, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). So, the Holy Spirit comes, the church grows and the repeated refrain in the early chapters is something like, "And the Lord added daily to

their number those who were being saved.” Peter preaches, Stephen gets martyred for his faith, and the church scatters after that. So, the witness goes from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria.

Then, a new international hub gets planted and watered in Antioch (ch. 1-12). During that time, Paul meets the resurrected Jesus (Acts 9), and in Acts 13 through to 20, he sets off with different companions to plant churches, disciple people, and preach the gospel to the ends of the earth. Luke records Paul’s three missionary journeys, the second of which features this encounter in Athens.

Now, we won’t read the text in one go. We’re just going to walk through it. So, have it open next to your notepad as we go along here.

b. Preamble

So, before we get deep into this text, I just want to pull out one quick thing which is absolutely fascinating. And I think it gets at the topic of why we might hold back in evangelism.

Paul had arrived to Athens alone, by boat, from Berea. His companions, Timothy and Silas (17:15), were back in Berea. If you’re familiar with the text, you’ll know this is unbelievable. There are three reasons why what we get from Acts 17 shouldn’t actually exist:

1. Paul actually felt called to Macedonia. One chapter earlier, it reads, “After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them” (16:10).
2. Last time he was near the marketplace was in Philippi, again in chapter 16. When he was there, Paul cast a demon out of a female slave, freeing her. But her owners, who had profited from the enslaved girl’s demon (cause it had the ability to predict the future), were enraged and brought Paul and Silas into the marketplace. The result of their debate in the marketplace was that they were thrown into prison!
3. Finally, the text just says that Paul was waiting for Timothy and Silas. He was just *waiting!*

He wasn’t called there, he was called to Macedonia. The risk of preaching could have been prison again. And, more than all that, he was just waiting. Here’s the point: *so often we disqualify ourselves from sharing Jesus because we think, “Oh, I’m not called, or the risk is too great, or there isn’t enough time.” I think our greatest temptation today is the latter.*

Let me start off this session by saying this:

1. The Great Commission calls each of us
2. The greatest risk we have in our context, for the most part, is just not being *liked*.... I know I feel that way sometimes. That’s probably not a sufficient reason.
3. There’s always enough time to share something *meaningful* about God. I remember when I was standing in line at church once, waiting for a coffee. I struck up a conversation with this guy...

But Paul thought, “No matter the place to which I am called, no matter the cost of preaching Jesus, no matter the time-limit by which I feel constrained – I can always witness.” Is that true of us...? *We should never discount an opportunity.*

So, I want to talk about four things. And if you're wondering where I got the headings for these five things, I am indebted to one commentator by the name of John Stott. You can organise this passage a number of ways, in terms of teaching it, but what he does is amazing. Other good commentaries on this text are Craig Keener's commentary, and the work of Lars Dahle (who did his PhD on this passage, and some of NT Wright's stuff). I want to talk about:

1. Where Paul Went
2. What Paul Saw
3. What Paul Said
4. What Paul Felt

Buckle up...

c. Where Paul Went

¹⁷So he [Paul] reasoned in the **synagogue** with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the **marketplace** day by day with those who happened to be there.

So, first: where Paul went. The two places to which he goes are the synagogue, the marketplace, and the Areopagus.

a. The Synagogue

So, the synagogue. Why would Paul go there first? The reason is simple: he himself was Jewish, and he was well versed in the Hebrew Scriptures, meaning that he could argue from them to the person of Jesus. It was how he began most of his times in different cities: he would go to the synagogue and reason with God-fearing Greeks and Jews.

It's a great model. It begs the question, "To what kind of people-group are you similar?" You should go there first – there will be less translation work for you to do, because you're already well-versed in their outlook on life.

b. The Marketplace

The next place he goes to is the marketplace, day-by-day. Now, what's that? The problem is that this translation doesn't do justice to what this place actually was. It was the *agora*. We don't have anything like it in our time.

Now, at that point, Athens was the cultural capital of the world. Not the power capital. It was the intellectual capital. The city had been a foremost city-state since the fifth century BC. Though under the military of the Roman Empire, it maintained intellectual independence. It was famous for its achievements in philosophy, most notably having been the place where Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were.

In its midst was the *agora* – *the marketplace*. So, who was there? *Everybody*. The marketplace was *the place*. Businessmen, artists, poets, media, philosophers, lawyers – all of them were there. In that day:

- you didn't have media, so the herald would announce the news in the *agora*.
- You didn't have academic journals, so the philosophers would debate ideas in the *agora*

It was where everything happened. The *agora* was the centre of public life.

The marketplace was not just where you shopped for food or consumer goods, but where you shopped for ideas and religion.

Now, Rome, Athens and Alexandria were probably the three most dominant cultural generators in the ancient world. And at the centre of those cities were their marketplaces.

And Paul takes his faith there.

Now, this is where it gets interesting. For the modern secular person, faith is something you do in private. You should never bring your faith into the public arena.

But this is actually a very pagan idea. Because we are pagans again. Paganism says, "Everybody has a god for a specific task." And that's fine. But don't tell me there's a God who is God of those gods. Don't tell me my god is not really god. Keep your god to yourself.

But the Bible doesn't let that be true. This is just logic: if God is the creator of everything, then he is the God of all Gods. He is lord over everything. In fact, that's the announcement given by Peter about Jesus in the upper room at Pentecost. He got up, and said, "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah" (Acts 2:36).

The Bible does not let us keep our faith private. In a place where people shop for everything, Paul says, "Come, taste and see. This is the way."

Now, the problem with a pagan view of god is that it is a a private view of faith. And there's two problems with that philosophy when it comes to witnessing. If that's your fundamental understanding, you'll either become someone who, when you witness, avoids the marketplace altogether or is too accommodating to the marketplace when you're there. It means you'll either avoid the market place or you'll accommodate it.

See, you avoid the marketplace of ideas because you can't imagine how this claim – that "Jesus Christ is Lord" – can have any relevance or power in that setting. So, you keep your faith private – not want to rock the boat.

Could you imagine if Paul did that? It would have been easy for him to stay in Jerusalem. If he wanted to be daring, even doing itinerant ministry to Jewish synagogues would have been enough. But he takes his faith to the marketplace.

On the other hand, imagine if Paul was too accommodating to the marketplace of ideas. Imagine if, for him, Jesus Christ wasn't really Lord. Rather than Jesus being "Lord of all," this makes him just one other option among a plethora of options. You reduce Jesus to relativity and pluralism. You've capitulated to culture.

Could you imagine if Paul did that? Imagine if he came to the marketplace and just said, "Oh, Jesus? No, he's not that different – he doesn't demand anything from your life that will ultimately change

you. What do you like about gods? Oh that? Yeah Jesus is like that.” No, Paul doesn’t do that. He goes *into* the marketplace with a different story: the true story; the more beautiful story.

He neither avoids the marketplace of ideas, nor does he just offer one other god amidst the plethora of gods. He takes the unchanging truth about God into the perpetually-shifting marketplace of ideas and says, “Do you want to know the real Lord? Do you want to know the real God?”

Two questions here:

1. Do we have a pagan view of faith (a territorial and private view of God), or a Christian view of faith (a universal view of God)? If it’s the latter, we’ll be the type of people who take God into the public squares without fear.
2. On the other hand, when we do that, do we do so in a way that testifies to the *difference* of our God to all other ideas? It’s so easy just to fold on particular parts about Christianity – say, the part where Jesus said, “If anyone wants to follow me, he must deny himself, take up their cross, and follow me.” There’s a balance to be struck here. And so the question is, “From where do we get that balance?”

And, that’s our next point: *What Paul Saw*

d. What Paul Saw

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

When Acts records that Paul saw the idols in the city, he uses the term *theoreo*, or *anatheoreo* which means to “observe” or “consider.” Interestingly, the term Luke uses here is utterly unique in the Scriptures, and the idea conveyed suggests that the city was “under” the idols. The imagery is that of allegiance and even *worship*.

And here, Luke is trying to get us to notice something. When Paul came to Athens, he probably came by boat. Which means that he would have seen the idols of the city before even entering it. One pagan orator noted that whoever approached Athens from afar would be awed by the sight. As Paul passed Cape Sounion, he would have seen the Temple of Poseidon, and from there the spear-tip and helmet of the statue of Athena constructed on the acropolis in Athens. As he approached the Piraeus port on the west side of Athens, he would have been able to view Athens’ temples on the Acropolis, as well as status of Athena and Zeus in the port. In the city itself, there were a plethora of altars and shrines; images of Apollo, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Bacchus, Dianna and Neptune. The entire Greek pantheon was there. Xenophon referred to Athens as “one great altar, one great sacrifice.” One Roman satirist joked that it was easier to find there an idol than it was a man.

Athens was under idols.

In our contemporary moment, those things Paul would have seen are now just cultural artefacts. The average Westerner wouldn’t consider them to be anything substantial. But that doesn’t mean we are any less the worshippers; it just means our idols have changed.

David Foster Wallace, the postmodern novelist, himself an atheist, said it like this, “Because here’s something else that’s weird but true: in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.”

Why did he say that? Because worship is the habit of entrusting your meaning, significance, safety, satisfaction and security to *something*; without which you would feel meaningless, worthless, vulnerable, despairing and fearful.

Contemporary society maybe superficially different from ancient ones, but they are fundamentally the same to ancient ones. The root of the word “culture” is the Latin *cultus*, meaning “to care, or tend a sacred site of worship.” Culture, in this etymological sense, is an expression of the thing around which a community centre themselves. Each culture has its own sites of worship (in England, it is the football stadium or the shopping mall); their priests (the secularist’s priests are the scientists in lab-coats who are the go-to interviewees of current affairs’ programs); and their sacrifices (one of which is the big question of immigration in Western Europe). Why? Because every person, community, and culture has a value or idea or *something* which outcompetes all others, letting you know what sites are special, who are the cultural authorities, and what is okay to sacrifice for the sake of its success.

See, the real problem with the world is not the bad things, but the good things that have become the best things. It’s not the philosophies of the world, but the allegiances of our heart. And it’s the Christian story – the gospel – that helps us see underneath everything; that our hearts are idol factories; that we have many “god-substitutes.”

So, here’s another clue for good cultural engagement: get under the philosophies to the idols; see through the philosophia to the philos – the loves people have an around which they centre their lives.

We need to speak to people on this level. Pascal said, “Men despise religion, they hate it and are afraid it might be true. To cure that we have to begin by showing that religion is not contrary to reason. That it is worthy of veneration and should be given respect. Next it should be made loveable, should make the good wish it were true. Then, show them that it is indeed true.”

When we engage people on the level of their loves, then we start to see the real sword work of apologetics.

i. Worldview Talk

And this is where I think understanding the concept of worldview is helpful. And worldviews have two facets two them: the intellectual and the narrative.

On the intellectual side, James Olthuis, the Christian philosopher, defines world view like this:

A worldview (or vision of life) is a framework or set of fundamental beliefs through which we view the world and our calling and future in it.

If you were to try and articulate a worldview propositionally, every worldview would answer a host of fundamental questions. Jame W. Sire, the author and editor, argues that there are seven main questions:

1. What is prime reality? *God, gods, or material*
2. What is the nature of external reality? *Ordered, chaotic, accidental*
3. What is a human being? *A machine, a soul, a heart, a brain, a...*
4. What happens to a person at death? *Extinction, reincarnation, resurrection, sleep*
5. Why is it possible to know anything at all? *The evolution of thinking, the design of our minds by an all-knowing Mind*
6. How do we know what is right or wrong? *Preference, social contracts, survival, moral law*
7. What is the meaning of human history? *Accidental, cyclical, linear, progressive, preparatory*

Ravia Zacharias, the apologist, argues that there are four basic questions:

1. Origin
2. Meaning
3. Morality
4. Destiny

Or, in other words:

1. Where do I come from?
2. Why am I here?
3. How should I live my life?
4. Where am I going?

So, the answers you'd give to these are propositional. Where do I come from? Theory x. Where am I going? *Position a*.

So, let's take the three main worldviews: atheism, pantheism, and theism.

i. Atheism

What does atheism say about origins – where do we come from?

What does atheism say about meaning – why are we here?

What does atheism say about morality – how should I live my life?

What does atheism say about destiny – where am I going?

ii. Pantheism

Pantheism is the term given to describe eastern religions: Hinduism and Buddhism. It is also the fundamental assumptions undergirding New Age spirituality

What does pantheism say about origins – where do we come from? **We are an extension of the oneness of the universe. Atman is Brahman.**

What does pantheism say about meaning – why are we here?
Our goal is to seek oneness with the universe.

What does pantheism say about morality – how should I live my life?
Ultimately karma and reincarnation are the poles between which you work out how to live your life

What does pantheism say about destiny – where am I going?
To be diffused into ultimate reality – becoming one with God

iii. Theism

What does theism say about origins – where do we come from?

What does theism say about meaning – why are we here?

What does theism say about morality – how should I live my life?

What does theism say about destiny – where am I going?

* * * * *

But, worldviews are not just ideas you look at, they are the imagination you look through. They are the allegiances you have which colour the world in a particular way. The end of the quote from Olthuis goes like this:

A worldview need not be fully articulated: it may be so internalized that it goes largely unquestioned; it may not be explicitly developed into a systematic conception of life; it may not be theoretically deepened into a philosophy; it may not even be codified into creedal form; it may be greatly refined through cultural-historical development. Nevertheless, this vision is a channel for the ultimate beliefs which give direction and meaning to life. It is the integrative and interpretive framework by which order and disorder are judged; it is the standard by which reality is managed and pursued; it is the set of hinges on which all our everyday thinking and doing turns.

i. People don't realise they have a worldview

First, I think that the biggest implication for this is that people therefore don't realise they have a worldview, or that they have a very incoherent worldview, which is what makes evangelism so much more difficult.

There was a postmodern novelist, named David Foster Wallace. He told the story of these two fish which gets at this idea. You might have heard of it...

There are these two young fish swimming along. They happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way. The older fish nods at them and says "Morning, boys. How's the

water?" Now, the two young fish swim on for a bit, and they're both thinking. Eventually, one of them can't take it anymore, so he looks over at the fish and says "WHAT. IS. WATER?!"

The point the story makes is this: that the most normal realities in our lives are often the ones most difficult to notice. Most people don't realise they have a worldview.

ii. Worldviews Influence Evidence

The second thing it means is that different people treat evidence differently, based on their worldview. This point is illustrated well by a fictional anecdote.

A man woke up one morning convinced he was dead. His wife thought he was joking and cheekily asked him how he could be *talking* about being dead. But it soon became clear that he was serious: he was dead. After various attempts to convince him otherwise, she finally invited a brilliant psychiatrist to interview him and try and remedy the situation. No change. Eventually, the psychiatrist had an idea. He opened one of his weighty medical texts and pointed his patient to one of the incontrovertible facts about dead people: they do not bleed. "With the heart stopping and the blood coagulating," he said slowly and precisely, "a dead body can no longer breathe." The evidence was compelling and the man agreed: dead people certainly do not bleed. At this moment, the psychiatrist reached for a pin and thrust it into the patient's forearm. Blood shot straight up like a tiny fountain. Astonish, the man looked at his arm and exclaimed, "Well, what do you know, dead people do bleed after all!"

Now, one of the things this means is that much of the disagreement we experience in talking about deeper questions doesn't necessarily come because the evidence isn't good enough, it's because people have deeper assumptions which they need to work through. This means we need to be good at conversation.

Now this might sound obvious, but it's so easy to miss. We need to get good at conversation. That might sound inauthentic, but I'm reminded of a scene from *Pride and Prejudice*. Mr Darcy says, "I have not that talent which some possess of conversing easily with strangers." But Elizabeth responds, "I do not play [the piano] so well as I should wish to, but I have always supposed that to be my fault because I would not take the trouble of practicing."

It might seem fake to think about practicing good conversation, but it is of the highest sincerity if your primary goal is to help them discover their worldview and show them Jesus.

a. What Paul Said

²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

If Paul met in the Stoa Basileios, he would have been surrounded by Greek religion and mythology. The portico's tiling portrayed Thesus and Paetheon; a statue of Zeus was nearby, along with pictures of the twelve Olympian deities. Nearby stood the temple of the paternal Apollo and the sanctuary of the Mother of gods.

Paul's contact-point – or, passage of Scripture (so to speak) – was the altar inscribed, “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD” (vv. 22-23). References like these have been found in ancient literature and numerous sources refer to them in Athens.¹ Though literary sources detail such altars particularly in Athens, the idea would be intelligible to other Gentiles.

One legendary story provides context for the altars. During a plague in Athens in the 6th century BC, offering to propitiate all known deities proved ineffective. When the Cretan Epimenides was called to stay the plague, he ordered that black and white sheep wander the Areopagus, and where each lay down, sacrifice was offered to the deity associated with that site. This is how Diogenes Laertius explained the numerous nameless altars in Attica. Athenians had consented to sacrifice humans to propitiate gods; in historical times, they would appeal to gods in times of plague. The point is this: in a world where gods were fashioned for utility, the best insurance was the fashion an altar where an unknown god can be propitiated.

Paul finds a helpful bridge here without compromising theologically. He says nothing of the city's patron deity, Athena. Nor, when he quotes the pagan poem does he mention the name of the god to whom the poem is addressed. First Paul underscores their worship, then their ignorance.

Now, here is the question. Did Paul's acknowledgment about “something unknown” serve to confirm the authenticity of their worship and thus the legitimacy of their cult? If so, it would mean that we can agree with one writer about the following: “In the footsteps of St Paul, we believe that we may speak not only of the unknown God of the Greeks but also of the hidden Christ of Hinduism?... [such that] the good and bona fide Hindu is saved by Christ and not by Hinduism, but it is through the sacraments of Hinduism, through the message of morality and the good life, through the mysterion that comes down to him through Hinduism, that Christ saves the Hindu normally?” This is a popular reconstruction which suggests that other faiths might be true inasmuch as they are fallen responses to general revelation. The danger is that it legitimises false worship.

On the other hand, some think that the thing which Paul addresses is not the legitimacy of their worship but the presence of their ignorance. For example, some converts who turn to Jesus from a non-Christian religious system usually don't think of themselves as having transferred their worship from one God to another, but as having begun to now worship in truth the God they were previously trying to worship in ignorance.

I think it's both. Paul is addressing the sincerity of their worship and the ignorance of their god. My shorthand for this has always been:

- Receive
- Reject
- Redeem

¹ See Pausanias who travelled in 175 AD and recorded having found a similar altar on the peninsula called Piraeus in his *Tour of Greece*.

Receive their sincerity; reject their theology; redeem their worship.

a. **What Paul Felt**

b.

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

So often, we go to the Bible looking for the perfect how to, but we don't get it. Most of the time, when we need guidance for something the Bible tells us what type of person would be able to discern God's will, rather than what God's will is explicitly. In short terms: we expect a 'how to,' but it usually gives us a "who to become." And it's not less true in this situation here.

If you jump to verse 16, you'll notice that it says that when Paul entered the city, he was "greatly distressed when he saw that the city was full of idols." And this term "greatly distressed" hints at what is really going on.

The term translated is the Greek verb *paroxyno*, which originally had medical connotations and was used of a seizure or epileptic fit. But, the reason it is hard to parse here is because it is only used once elsewhere in the New Testament, in 1 Corinthians 13, where Paul describes love as "not easily angered" (1 Cor 13:5). The term seems to suggest that Paul was irritated, and some translations say just that.

But, this misunderstands the word. *Paroxyno* is the verb regularly used by the Greek translation of the Old Testament (which is mostly what the Jews would quote – especially Jesus) describing God's reaction to idolatry. When the Israelites made the golden calf at Mount Sinai, when they were guilty of immorality in relation to the Baal of Peor, and when the Northern Kingdom made another calf to worship in Samaria, each time the verb *paroxyno* is used to describe God's anger there. A lot of the time, the best translation is jealousy.

Exodus 34:14 says that Yahweh, "whose name is jealous, is a jealous God." And Paul felt that jealousy too.

Now, one of the pushbacks against this idea of jealousy in the Old Testament is that it makes God seem petty. But, this couldn't be further from the case. I actually preached on God's jealousy once, and a lady came up to me afterwards and said, "I'd never heard it explained like that before, I now need to get rid of my idols." She was a sort-of spiritual experimentalist, and she had a shopping-cart spirituality. She gave them up that day. Why? Because of the jealousy of God.

Jealousy, at its heart, is the resentment of rivals. But, it can be ambivalent. *Whether it is good or bad depends on whether the rival has any business to be there.* For one human to be jealous of another human for having greater beauty or brilliance is sinful because it presumes that one human has a rightful monopoly over those things. But, if a husband is displaced by a third-party to his wife, he is rightfully jealous. Jealousy combines absolute compassion with holy anger. And God says, "I am the Lord, that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols" (Isa 42:8). God is rightfully compassionate and angry – *jealous* – when we give our exclusive allegiance to anyone or anything else other than him.

And this is so profound, because it tells us something about true love. Love is not just mild feelings, but thunderous ones. If you're a parent, and you love your daughter, but you see someone come along and woo her in a poor direction, you don't just think, "Aw, I'm heartbroken." You get mad. Why? Because the opposite of love is not anger. The opposite of love is indifference. If you see your spouse or your child or anybody you love persuaded to follow after something which is for their harm, and you're indifferent, you don't love them.

The pain Paul felt in Athens was not simply anger, and it wasn't just simply love: it was a mixture of both. Paul felt God's holy jealousy.

Now, let's just say that Paul was *only* angry, what would he have done? He'd probably have had less composure; he probably would have been more obnoxious in his approach to the Athenians. Now, you read the account and that doesn't happen. Instead, Paul is like a wordsmith, treading a fine line between relevance to the Athenian philosophers and challenge to their worldview. He *reasons* in the marketplace. So, he is gentle, and composed.

Let's just say that Paul wasn't angry, what would he have done? Well, he wouldn't have had the impetus to enter into the marketplace.

If you're not filled with anger, you won't have the *courage* to engage people in their worldviews. But if you only have anger, you won't have the composure or the gentleness. One leaves the marketplace unengaged, the other leaves it scarred with your human rage. For you to effect real change, you need both.

What's the solution? The cross. Why? If you know that you need to be the type of person who requires both courage and composure; both the fuel of holy anger to get you aroused by people's idolatry, as well as the gentleness of compassion to give you sensitivity to people in their idolatry, the only thing in any religion that shows that combined so well is the cross.

See, the cross represents the biggest compliment and scariest verdict. It says that you are so broken and sinful and morally wayward than you ever could have thought (because God himself had to die to atone for your sins); yet, that you are more loved and cherished than you ever could have imagined (because God was willing). Or, to put it in more relevant terms: the cross shows us that God is rightfully angry at our love of things other than himself, but it also shows us that he extends compassion to us by taking that wrath upon himself. Unless you get that, you won't feel what Paul felt.

Stott (1990) writes, "The reason we can't speak the way Paul speaks is because we can't see the way Paul sees and the reason we can't see the way Paul sees is because we don't feel what Paul feels." What did Paul feel? He felt the compassionate yet indignant heart of God.

If you're not fuelled with the jealous love of God (indignation), you won't have the courage to do what Paul did; if you're only filled with indignation, you won't have the gentleness and sensitivity to do as Paul did. Being melted by the cross (God's holy, just and loving, gracious character)

What else holds us back?

Here's the question: When you think about doing evangelism undergirded by apologetics, is this where you start?