

To An Unknown God

Acts 17:16-34

Apostolic missionary strategy often embodied in Acts speeches:

- Acts 2 – Peter – gospel for the Jews – Jesus of Nazareth as fulfilment of OT
- Acts 10 – Peter – gospel for ‘Godfearers’ – God give the HS to those from every nation
- Acts 14 - Paul – gospel for uneducated pagans – God shows kindness to all through rain and crops
- Acts 17 – Paul – gospel for educated pagans

Paul’s approach has been criticised, e.g. John Wimber in “Power Evangelism”– “a few believed” (v34). Immediately left for Corinth (Acts 18) where he worked in the Spirit’s power instead of using reason (1 Cor 1-2). But all Acts speeches are placed by Luke as exemplary.

The story so far:

v16-21 – Paul evangelising, spreading good news, Jesus’ resurrection (defeat of death) (note – not his sacrificial atoning death but his death-defeating resurrection). Doesn’t really make much contact with his hearers (babblers / foreign gods). So much of our God-talk requires a huge amount of background knowledge that is less and less available (‘God-fearers’ were key to the spread of the gospel – prepared in advance / background in Jewish / biblical thought – fewer of these today). At least they were open to listen (also more true today – e.g. Xmas party 2004 with neighbours).

v22-23 Paul finds points of contact with his audience / commends their religiosity (though even that is double-edged for some of his hearers). Finds a way in through the altar to the unknown God – “Paul claims for the Christian God the space left by the unknown god” (Anton Wessels in “Europe : was it ever really Christian?”). Encourages us to look for the God-spaces left open to us in our cultures.

v24-28 Paul gives a Stoic philosophical speech – Greek philosophy developed as a reaction to Greek polytheism (no accident that Socrates, Plato et al arose after the Greek poets Homer and Hesiod wrote down the stories of the gods. “Gods that look like human beings, steal, commit adultery and threaten like human beings do not exist” (Xenophanes, 580-485 BC). Developed instead the idea of one God, distant, unlike us, hard to reach. The goal of philosophy was to move closer to this one God – cf v27 “God did this so men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him”. But also a non-philosophical idea (“though he is not far from each one of us”) – not in philosophy, but true because God became human in Christ. Paul finds lots he can agree to with his hearers, but is also willing to challenge their assumptions because of who Jesus was.

v29-32 deep confrontation and challenge to Greek worldview – Greek philosophy viewed created matter as evil and spirit as good - an easy temptation for Christians to fall into but we must remember God declared creation to be ‘good’, and Revelation promises a new heaven and a new earth. Christianity is materialistic not spiritualistic. Greek philosophers were trying to escape the prison of the body so that their spirit could be free after death – resurrection not attractive in this context.

Note also he brings it all back to Jesus of Nazareth – starts with the unknown god – ends with “he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead” (v31).

Contact and confrontation – a theology of culture

My starting point for understanding human cultures is Gen 1:26-28.

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground”.

*So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.*

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it”

All cultures are made by human beings, who, being made in the image of God, share (among other things) in his creative capacity. All cultures, through their beliefs, values, and permitted and proscribed behaviours, are attempts to bring some kind of order and understandability to the complex and chaotic world that we encounter. They are attempts to make sense of the cacophony of reality (control and order is implied in the ‘rule’ / ‘subdue’ language of these verses). As such, human cultures are good, and the human propensity to create culture is a fulfilment of our created identity.

However, we are no longer simply created in the image of God. Gen 3 contains the story of human fallenness. Through sin, humanity is now cut off from God, compelled to wander (like Cain) in the cosmos, looking for a home.

However, although sin is a corruption and a twisting, it has not eradicated the image of God in humanity. The creation mandate for human multiplication, to ‘fill the earth’, given to humanity in Gen 1:28, is reiterated to Noah in Gen 9:1. Cain and his descendants built cities and developed agriculture, the arts, and technology (Gen 4:17-22) despite the judgement of God upon their ancestor. Humanity is still creative, sharing in that aspect of the divine image, even while fallen.

Thus human cultures are both good and bad, all mixed up together. Just as human beings are both made in the image of God, and also ‘totally depraved’ (which does not mean entirely evil, but instead corrupted throughout by sin, even our good bits), so are human cultures. Some try to separate cultures into elements that are ‘good’, ‘bad’ and ‘indifferent’, but just as in my own life, where my weaknesses and failings are so often the flipside of my strengths, so it is with human cultures.

It would be much easier if we could separate out the various elements, embracing the good and rejecting the bad. However, Jesus’ parable of the so-called “wheat and tares” (Matt 13:24-30)

The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed ears, then the weeds also appeared. The owner’s servants came to him and said ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let them both grow until the harvest

shows that God will allow good and evil to co-exist until his final judgement, and the reason Jesus gives for this is “while you are pulling up the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them” (v29). Trying to make the separation now may result in rejecting something that is good.

Thus we have not only to live with the different culture(s) of the world; we also have to accept that what seems bad to us (because it is different, or a threat) might actually be good. For example, postmodernity has undermined the hubris of modernity, which in turn was (and is) no particular friend to the Christian faith.

Plundering The Egyptians

So how do we relate to our culture, in this case, postmodern Western culture?

Freed from servitude, the Israelites were led by Moses to Sinai, where they met with and entered into a covenant relationship with Yahweh. Once the covenant was confirmed, instructions were given for the construction of the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle, whose existence was symbolic of the very presence of God among his people, a core Old Testament theological premise. Offerings of gold, silver, precious stones, fine linen and many other products were made to enable the construction of these and other artefacts of worship (Exodus 25:1–8).

But where did all these valuable items come from? For the people of Israel had until very recently been indentured workers who had been further oppressed and exploited as forced labour (Genesis 47:18–21; Exodus 1:11). In no way would they have been able to build up the reserves of wealth and valuables described above. They came instead from a combination of last-minute charitable donations and looting that took place immediately prior to the exodus from Egypt itself.

Now the Lord said to Moses, I will bring one more plague on Pharaoh and Egypt. After that, he will let you go from here, and when he does, he will drive you out completely. Tell the people that men and women alike are to ask their neighbours for articles of silver and gold.' ... The Israelites did as Moses instructed and asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing. The Lord made the Egyptians favourably disposed towards the people, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians (Exodus 11:1–2; 12:35–36)

This event was developed into a missiological principle by the third-century theologian Origen, whose work in Alexandria did more to relate the Christian gospel to the Greek philosophical worldview than did anyone else's. He advised his protégé Gregory to study Greek philosophy firstly as a preparation for Christianity and secondly so that its ideas could be put to the service of the gospel:

Perhaps something of this kind is prefigured in what is written in Exodus, that the children of Israel were commanded to ask from their neighbours, and those who dwelt with them, vessels of silver and gold, and clothing, in order that by spoiling the Egyptians they might have material for the preparation of the things which pertained to the service of God [i.e. the tabernacle and its artefacts].

This 'plundering' is not an isolated example. Neither the monarchy nor the Jerusalem Temple was an institution specifically commanded by God, yet they both became important vehicles for the revelation of God's truth. Nor were these structures immune from corruption, as both were criticized by the prophets for abuse and idolatry.

In the Old Testament we not only see the adoption by God's people (and by God himself) of models and structures from the surrounding environment. We also see, from time to time, the disappearance of older structures and the emergence of new ones more appropriate for a new context. The patriarchal families disappear during captivity in Egypt, as Israel grows into an entire people, including many not of the biological line of Jacob (Exodus 12:37–38). The charismatic leaders known as 'judges' disappear with the emergence of the monarchy. And in the exilic and post-exilic diaspora, Temple and priesthood disappear from view, and a new life of worship coalesces around the structures of synagogue and Sabbath. This pattern of adoption, transformation and replacement continues into the New Testament. Jesus himself challenged the notion of Sabbath, which had become restrictive rather than liberating. The apostles continued this trend, abandoning even the apparently divinely sanctioned practices of dietary restrictions and circumcision in the light of God's apparent work in a new era (Acts 10-11; 15).

The adoption of ideas and practices from the surrounding culture is not just a recurrent reality in Christian history, but also something intrinsic and valuable to the Christian faith itself. Commenting on the translation of the Christian faith from its Jewish origins, firstly into the Greek and Roman worlds and later into the Germanic tribal context of northern Europe, Andrew Walls comments:

The dynamic of turning towards Christ what was already there led to an expanded process of Christian understanding ... it forced people to think of the implications of daily life in terms of social identity and Christian identity, disturbing, challenging, altering the conventions of that life, but doing so from the inside. It was essentially a risky process, with many areas of doubt and difficulty.

Conclusion

Paul used the 'unknown god' as a God space, finding links into his hearer's lives and outlook on life. But he was also willing to confront and challenge them with the truth and reality of who Jesus of Nazareth was.

Similarly, we need to approach all cultures (including our own) expecting to see signs of the image of God in it (as well as the impact of human fallenness, from which we are not personally immune). And let's expect to find ways that we can 'plunder the Egyptians' today, putting our culture's ideas into the service of Jesus of Nazareth.

The decline of the church in the West gives us an opportunity to start again, to act as if we were missionaries entering this culture for the first time, and to find ways to communicate and embody the message of Christ and the life of his followers in that new culture. I can't wait.