

Acts 17:22-34, The Sermon on Mars Hill
December 5, 1992
H. Van Dyke Parunak

Overview

A. 19-21, Setting

Paul is under a "gentle" charge of preaching new gods, cf. the opposition in 16:21.

B. 22-23, Introduction

Establishes a point of contact with something in their culture. In this case, an extra altar "just in case." Thus defuses the charge of a new god; this is one you have all along suspected is there.

C. 24-29, God and the First Adam

Chiastic, and building on the theme of God's creative role. He is developing the ideas later expounded in Rom. 1, the argument from creation, and the responsibilities that it poses for men today.

1. 24-25, 29, inappropriate responses to his role as creator.

2. 26-27, 28, appropriate responses to this role.

With these two emphases, compare the liturgical confession: "We have done those things that we ought not to have done, and have left undone those things that we ought to have done." Paul hits the Athenians on sins both of omission and commission.

Application: Over and over we see that we cannot preach the gospel without bringing people's attention to the topic of sin! Until folk know that they have something to be saved from, they will never be saved.

The first segments of the two cases are more detailed than the summaries in 28-29, and both draw on the OT for their authority, while the summaries draw on pagan literature and logic.

Application: It's not wrong to appeal to culture or logic to illustrate the gospel; in fact, doing so draws on Paul's example. But it is wrong to rely solely or even primarily on such arguments.

1. 24-25, 29, inappropriate responses to God's role as creator (sins of commission).

Summary: Because God has created and continues to provide for all creatures, it is wrong to think that we can house or sustain him. Focus here is on God's creation of all things; no explicit mention of people.

a) 24-25, Detail

Chiastic again, ABBA, where A = a particular aspect of his creative role; B = inappropriate responses. Exposition is easier in the order ABAB.

- 1) 24a, A1, God's Role: the most inclusive description of his work. "All things and everything in them." Cf. Exod.20:11, the basis for the Sabbath rest in the Ten Commandments. Also echoes 14:15, from Paul's comments to pagans in Lystra. Starts where the Bible starts, in Gen. 1.

Application: A good starting point in witnessing to unbelievers in today's essentially pagan society.

- 2) 24b, B1, Inappropriate Response: restricting God to manmade

temples. He has made the world to house its inhabitants, whom he has also made. How absurd to think either that he needs a house or that we would be able to build it! This is to exchange the glory of the creature for that of the creator; to usurp his position of authority. Cf. Stephen's argument in ch. 7, that God only ever wanted a tabernacle and the Temple was just Solomon's idea.

- 3) 25b, A2, God's role: gives to all life, breath, all things. Focuses in on more detail of what God has done for his creatures. He did not just create them and turn them loose, but provides (present tense) everything they needs. Cf. 14:17.
- 4) 25a, B2, Inappropriate Response: seeking to provide God's presumed needs for sustenance. "Worship" = *gerapeuw*, only here in NT in divine sense; elsewhere means "to treat," as a doctor does the patient. Refers to offering of sacrifices to feed the deity; this (rather than provision of a substitute) is the meaning of sacrifice in most pagan religions (perhaps all??). Cf. Gilgamesh epic.

Again, reflecting OT, Jewish concepts of God: Ps. 50:8-12, "I will take no bullock out of thy house, nor he goats out of thy folds, for every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills," vv. 9-10.

b) 29, Summary

We are like God. So we ought not to suppose that he can be reduced to a statue. Cf. Socrates' teaching in Athens some five centuries earlier. (NB: unbelievers sometimes assert that we are wrong to describe God anthropomorphically; in fact, he has made us "in his image," and this justifies this sort of reasoning.)

2. 26-27, 28, appropriate responses to God's role as creator (sins of omission).

Summary: Because God has created us, we should seek after him. Focus here is on God's creation of men.

a) 26-27, Detail

This time, alternation between what God has done and our expected response.

- 1) 26a, A1, God's Role: He has made all nations "of one blood," of one descent (i.e., Adam), wherever they may dwell upon the earth. Thus counters pagan notion that each people is formed by its own protective deity.
- 2) 26b, B1, Desired Response: because God put us here, we should dwell on the face of the earth.

To the Greeks, this is a sugar pill, an easy-to-accept truth that would incline them to pay attention. In our day, it conveys a warning against radical environmentalism, which asserts that man is a virus on the surface of the earth and maintains that the world would be better if we weren't here! Cf. Gen. 1:28; 2:15, our responsibility to subdue, tend, and keep God's creation.

- 3) 26c, A2, God's Role: He has determined where and when the various nations live.

The point here is not racism (the reference to "time" implies that the regions change). Rather, because God has placed each nation in its place, no one is any closer to him than any other; cf. 27b, 28a: he is not far from every one of us.

- 4) 27a, Desired Response: because God is accessible to every nation, we are all responsible to seek him, grope for him, and indeed find him. This (not the building of temples) is the appropriate use of our hands, and the highest calling of humans: to seek the Lord.

b) 28b, Summary (from poets Aratus and Cleanthes)

We are to God like children to a parent; able to recognize him and seek for him.

3. Summary: Recognition of God as creator should lead us to abandon our proud presumption that we can house and sustain him, and instead should make us grateful recipients of the world he has given us and enthusiastic seekers to know him better. This is the duty of the children of the First Adam, and like their father, they fail in it.

D. 30-31, God and the Second Adam

Paul now turns from God's work in the first creation to the second. Chiasitic: ABC D CBA (OR: Repent in light of the coming judgment; believe in light of the past resurrection?)

1. D, Center: "he will judge the world in righteousness." The Athenians are responsible before God for the omissions and commissions outlined in the previous verses. "World," cf. v.26. Grows directly out of the argument there that people are responsible to the one who has placed them on the earth.

Application: Not only must the gospel make clear man's sin, but also the consequences of that sin, judgment before a righteous God.

2. C: God has appointed two things:
 - a) A day when this judgment will take place. There is an end and focus to history.
 - b) A man, a selected judge. So we won't be able to complain of unfairness. It will be one of our own, one touched with the feeling of our infirmities, who will be our judge--same quality enables him to be both judge and priest (Hebrews).
3. A: God's announcement. He has not kept this matter secret, but confronts people with two requirements.
 - a) Commands all men to repent (via Paul).
 - b) Notifies all men of the availability of salvation: "he has made faith available to all men [see margin], in raising him from the dead."
 - c) *Application:* The resurrection is what lets us know that God is able to save us. Proof of his power. ALSO: need for both repentance and faith. NB: says nothing about the substitutionary death of Christ! Resurrection is MORE important than death!

E. 32-34, The Outcome

Three classes of response, grouped into two

1. Outright rejection, 32a.

2. Deferment, 32b (cf. Felix in 24:25; Agrippa in 26:28). NB: grouped with the rejectors on one side of Paul's departure in v.33; this "cautious" attitude too often leads to hardening and rejection in the end.
3. Reception, 34. Includes one of the elders, Dionysius (a member of the court).
Query: how to reconcile these believers with Rom. 16:5 and 1 Cor. 16:15, which identify the household of Stephanas (and Epaenetus in particular) as the "firstfruits of Achaia"? The Roman province included this area. Either
 - a) Athens as a free city was not counted with the province; or
 - b) Paul is using the term in an older sense, for a small region on the gulf of Corinth; or
 - c) "firstfruits" is behaving as "firstborn" sometimes does, emphasizing not chronology but prominence and perhaps state as offering to the Lord. This is MM's sense, drawing on older Gk uses of the word. See also TDNT; Cremer p. 117. Seems to be the best resolution.

Summary

Witnessing to Pagans:

1. Need to make clear the foundation teachings of the OT: One God, on whom we depend and who does not depend on us; our duty to seek after him.
2. Fact of sin and of coming judgment.
3. Basic truth of Christianity: the resurrection.
4. Calls for response: repentance and faith.

Hymn:

Analysis

16-34, Athens

A. 16 setting [last study]

B. contrast -- modes of presentation (*men ... de*)

1. 17, General discussion with Jew and Greek [last study]

2. 18, focus on mktplace discussion with Gentiles: Stoics and Epicureans [last study]

3. 19-34, focus on the Stoic's question

a) 19-21, their focused question [last study]

b) 22-31, Paul's response

quote p

1) quote f: 22 Stagei\s de\ [o(] Pau^los e)n me/sw| tou^)Arei/ou Pa/gou e)/fh,

2) quote:

a>)/Andres)Aqhnai^oi,

b> kata\ pa/nta w(s deisidaimoneste/rous u(ma^s qewrw^:

c> 23 dierxo/menos ga\r kai\ a)nagewrw^n ta\ seba/smata u(mw^n eu(^ron kai\ bwmo\n e)n w(^| e)pege/grapto,)Agnw/stw| qew^|.

d> o(\ ou)^n a)gnou^ntes eu)sebei^te,

e> tou^to e)gw\ katagge/llw u(mi^n.

f> 24 o(qeo\s ... ou)k e)n xeiropoih/tois naoi^s katoikei^

1> comment <qeos>: o(poih/sas to\n ko/smon kai\ pa/nta ta\ e)n au)tw^|,

```

2> comment <geos>: ou(^tos ou)ranou^ kai\ gh^s
      u(pa/rxwn ku/rios
g> 25 ou)de\ u(po\ xeirw^n a)nqrwpi/nwn qerapeu/etai
      prosdeo/meno/s tinos,
h> au)to\s didou\s pa^si zwh\n kai\ pnoh\n kai\ ta\ pa/nta:
i> 26 e)poi/hse/n te e)c e(no\s pa^n e)/qnos a)nqrw/pwn
      katoikei^n e)pi\ panto\s prosw/pou th^s gh^s,
j> o(ri/sas prostetagme/nous kairou\s kai\ ta\s o(roqesi/as
      th^s katoiki/as au)tw^n,
k> 27 zhtein to\n geo\n
l> ei) a)/ra ge yhlafh/seian au)to\n kai\ eu(/roien,
m> kai/ ge ou) makra\n a)po\ e(no\s e(ka/stou h(mw^n
      u(pa/rxonta.
n> 28 )En au)tw^| ga\r zw^men kai\ kinou/meqa kai\
      e)sme/n,
o> quote p
1> quote f: w(s kai/ tines tw^n kaq' u(ma^s poihtw^n
      ei)rh/kasin,
2> quote: Tou^ ga\r kai\ ge/nos e)sme/n.
p> 29 ge/nos ou)^n u(pa/rxontes tou^ qeou^
q> ou)k o)fei/lomen nomi/zein xrusw^| h)\ a)rgu/rw| h)\
      li/qw|, xara/gmati te/xnhs kai\ e)ngumh/sews a)nqrw/pou,
      to\ qei^on ei)^nai o(/moion.
r> 30 tou\s me\n ou)^n xro/nous th^s a)gnoi/as u(peridw\n
s> o( geo\s ta\ nu^n paragge/llei toi^s a)nqrw/pois pa/ntas
      pantaxou^ metanoiei^n,
t> 31 kaqo/ti e)/sthsen h(me/ran
1> e)n h(^| me/llei kri/nein th\n oi)koume/nhn e)n
      dikaiosunh| e)n a)ndri\
      a: w(^| w(/risen,
2> pi/stin parasxw\n pa^sin a)nasth/sas au)to\n e)k
      nekrw^n.

```

c) 32-34, People's response

- 1) temporal p
 - a> time: 32)Akou/santes de\ a)na/stasin nekrw^n
 - b> text: contrast
 - 1> oi(me\n e)xleu/azon,
 - 2> quote p
 - a: quote f: oi(de\ ei)^pan,
 - b: quote:)Akouso/meqa/ sou peri\ tou/tou kai\
 pa/lin.
- 2) 33 ou(/tws o(Pau^los e)ch^lqen e)k me/sou au)tw^n.
Use of *outws*: cf. 7:8; 19:20; 20:11 (good comparison)
- 3) 34 tine\s de\ a)/ndres kollhqe/ntes au)tw^| e)pi/steusan,
e)n oi(^s kai\ Dionu/sios o()Areopagi/ths kai\ gunh\
o)no/mati Da/maris kai\ e(/teroi su\n au)toi^s.