

Evangelism in a Secular Culture

How can we reach a secular generation in Europe with the gospel of Jesus Christ? Paul's visit in Lystra and Athens (Acts 14 & 17) are our two major windows into the question of how the apostles communicated with a Gentile audience. Despite their differences these two events in the life of Paul displays a coherent pattern. Recovering the apostles' way of thinking can help us to fulfill our calling in Europe today.

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I. Introduction

- A. In the book of Acts Paul presents his message in three different contexts: in the Synagogue, in the market place and in the courtroom.

II. Paul in Lystra, Acts 14:8-18

A. Paul's Attitude

1. Identification: "We too are only men, human like you"
2. Affirmation: partly right in seeing Paul as a Hermes-figure who brings "good news"
3. Challenge: "telling you to turn from these worthless things"

B. Paul's Argument: "He has not left himself without testimony"

1. Cosmos: "God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them"
2. Humanity: "He provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy"

3. History: “In the past, he let all nations go their own way...” (but now ...)

III. Paul in Athens, Acts 17

A. Paul was, to use NT Wright’s metaphor, playing simultaneous chess with Polytheists, Epicureans, and Stoics!

B. Paul moved from *contact* to *contrast* to *conflict*.

1. He chose a creative starting point; the altar to an unknown god.
2. He clarified God’s relation to the world; transcendence and immanence.
3. He reasoned with his audience: “Therefore ...”, “He has given proof ...”
4. He challenged his audience: “but now He commands all people everywhere to repent.”

C. Paul focused on three major themes:

1. God: what is our view of God?
2. Man: what is our place in the world?
3. History: what has happened and what will happen?

IV. Learning from Paul for Today's Evangelism

A. Several aspects of Paul's ministry in Lystra and Athens stand out:

1. His view of truth
2. His different starting points
3. His respect for a Gentile audience, quoting their poets Epimenedes and Aratus
4. His logical structure, moving from God, to man, to history
5. His courage to challenge and direct people to the resurrected Christ

B. Paul worked with the big picture. He talked about the whole world and all people and moved his hearers from the absolute universal to the most particular; one man. The man God has appointed to judge everyone and he has "given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."