

Paul vs. the Athenian Intellectuals

by Phil Johnson

Lots of people argue that the apostle Paul is the very model of a postmodern ministry strategist, and that Acts 17 is the classic narrative passage where we see his genius for cultural assimilation in all its perfect splendor.

Really? Let's see how that chapter actually unfolds.

Acts 17 has become a favorite passage for those who insist if we're not finding (or creating) as much common ground as possible between church and culture we are not properly contextualizing the gospel. "Paul's Mars-hill sermon embodies all the major elements of postmodern missional ministry," they say. "He used culture, contextualization, conversation, and charitableness to reach out to the philosophers of Athens."

In reality, Paul used none of those strategies—at least not in the way they have been defined and packaged by today's trend-setters. But let's start with a simple list currently-popular buzzwords and examine Acts 17 in that light. These are the tools that supposedly are essential for missional outreach today: culture, contextualization, conversation, and charitableness. We'll use those four words as our outline to work through a survey of Paul's sermon:

CULTURE

Don't miss what Paul was doing here. He wasn't shoe-horning God into an open niche in Greek mythology. He wasn't affirming the beliefs of Athenian philosophy. As far as the *religious* aspect of their culture was concerned, he stood against it, and his opening statement made that fact absolutely clear to them. He could not possibly have been more counter-cultural.

CONVERSATION

Paul is simply declaring the truth here; not sponsoring a colloquium about it. He had already provoked discussions and debates about the gospel in the synagogue and in the marketplace, but now that he had his foot in the door and an audience with the Areopagus, he doesn't say, "Let's talk about this. I'm interested in learning more about *your* approach to the spiritual disciplines and *your* ideas about ethics. And tell me what *you guys* think about the God of Abraham, and maybe we can learn from one another." Instead, he homes in on the very heart of what he wants them to know. He is *preaching* here, not inviting a conversation.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

There is an obvious and legitimate need to speak a language people understand if you want to reach them. Paul didn't go into Athens and speak Hebrew to the Areopagites. What he did *not* do was adapt his message in any way to the basic values and belief systems of that culture. He shunned the tactic of “contextualization” in the sense that word is usually understood today.

CHARITABLENESS

The postmodern notion of "charitableness" (which is not the same thing as the biblical concept of *charity*) is a broad-minded, altruistic, overly tolerant attitude toward opposing beliefs and non-Christian religions, where you refuse to take dogmatic positions on anything. You use appeasement and compromise rather than antithesis and confrontation to try to win the other person's admiration. Paul did nothing like that in Athens.

The gospel we are called to proclaim doesn't cower before opposition. It isn't intimidated by human wisdom. It isn't shaken by rejection. It doesn't waver from the truth. It doesn't shift and change content to suit the preferences or felt needs of an audience. It confronts every worldview, every false religion, every superstitious belief, every human philosophy, and every skeptical opinion.