

## *Paul at the Areopagus: The Antithesis of Relationship Evangelism*

As we have seen, Acts 16 is the passage Evans chose to use to set out what he considers to be the major scriptural justification for his thesis. Very well. In the previous chapter, ‘What of Scripture?’, I looked in some detail at this. But as I noted at the time, Evans does not seem to find anything in Acts 17:16-34 (nor, for that matter, in Acts 14:8-20) worth using for his purpose. I realise, of course, that no writer can include everything, but surely Evans should have at least mentioned these two passages? I would put it stronger. In the present context, nothing could be more relevant than these two passages (especially Acts 17:16-34), passages in which we have the record of Paul dealing with pagans – religious pagans. How much more relevant could we get?

I say ‘religious pagans’, but this, of course, is a tautology; all pagans, all men, are ‘religious’. Oh yes they are – however stoutly they deny it. There are no atheists. Every man has, every man believes in and yields devotion to, some sort of a god – self, the rational mind, a philosophy, evolution, sex, power, money, reputation, self-gratification, or whatever. The list is endless. As Martin Luther said, the great pope is Pope Self. Yes, all men are religious. Those who deny it, deny it religiously!

And so to Acts 17:16-34.

I am not alone in asserting the importance and relevance of Acts 17:16-34 in the present context. Take Georges Housney:

Paul’s speech to the Greek philosophers in Athens takes up a space of just eleven verses, yet it has occupied theologians

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and those interested in evangelism<sup>1</sup> for decades. There is hardly a book on missions that does not use this story to support a variety of views on evangelistic<sup>2</sup> theory and practice.<sup>3</sup>

And Robert L. Deffinbaugh:

The longer I look at the Athenian philosophers, these ancient heathen, the more they look like Americans [the West in general – DG] of today. These Gentile heathen of centuries ago enjoyed the blessings of political freedom in what was one of the earliest democracies. They were cultured, highly intelligent, and educated, and very religious, but they had rejected God and exchanged the worship of the one true God for ‘gods’ of their own. How much like them our non-Christian culture is. We have more confidence in human reasoning and our search for truth than we do in the one who is the truth, the Lord Jesus Christ. We, as a culture, are always in pursuit of something new and novel.<sup>4</sup>

No wonder then, that, according to F.F. Bruce:

...probably no eleven<sup>5</sup> verses in Acts have formed the text for such an abundance of commentary as has gathered around Paul’s Areopagus speech.<sup>6</sup>

Again:

The bibliography on this discourse is immense.<sup>7</sup>

Ben Witherington III:

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<sup>1</sup> For those ‘interested in evangelism’ Housney had ‘missiologists’.

<sup>2</sup> Housney had ‘missiological’.

<sup>3</sup> Georges Housney: ‘Analysis of Paul’s Acts 17’.

<sup>4</sup> Bob (Robert L.) Deffinbaugh: ‘The Athenian Encounter and Contemporary Christianity’ in ‘The Apostle in Athens, Preaching to Philosophers (Acts 17:15-34)’.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce had ‘ten’.

<sup>6</sup> F.F. Bruce: *The Book of the Acts (Revised Edition)*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1988, p333.

<sup>7</sup> F.F. Bruce: *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary (Third Revised and Enlarged Edition)*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, (Apollos, Leicester), 1990, p379.

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This passage is in many regards one of the most important in all of Acts, as is shown by the enormous attention scholars have given it. In fact it has attracted more scholarly attention than any other passage in Acts.<sup>8</sup>

And yet Evans, in a major book on evangelism, found nothing useful in Acts 17:16-34 to support his case, not even to give it a passing mention. Why not? The silence, to me at least, speaks volumes.

In this chapter, I (briefly) make good the lack. The question that needs to be kept in mind is this: Does Acts 17:16-34 destroy or support Evans' thesis?

Paul, moved – ‘greatly distressed’ (Acts 17:6), ‘vexed’, ‘grieved’, ‘burning’, even to ‘paroxysm’ – by the idolatry at Athens,<sup>9</sup> took the gospel to the Jews (and proselytes) by reasoning with them in the synagogue (or its equivalent), as was his custom (Acts 9:20; 13:5,14; 14:1; 16:13; 17:1-2,10; 18:4,19; 19:8). Not only in the synagogue, but also in the marketplace, he attempted to engage with as many as showed interest, whether Jews or pagans:

While Paul was waiting for [Silas and Timothy] at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there (Acts 17:16-17).

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<sup>8</sup> Ben Witherington III: *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, The Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 1998, p511.

<sup>9</sup> Paul knew what God thinks of idolatry and idolaters. (Note: ‘thinks’, not merely ‘thought’ – the New Testament is full of warnings about idolatry, and sophisticated 21st-century man is still an idolater). For a sample of the way God confronted such through the psalmist and the prophets, see Ps. 115:4-8; 135:15-18; Isa. 44:9-20; 46:1-2 (see, hear, my ‘Do You Get the Joke?’); Jer. 10:2-15. If that does not show that God confronts idolaters, words have lost all meaning. Dismissive ridicule, irony (not to say, sarcasm), blunt warning, and all the rest – I can see where the stirring of Paul’s spirit came from, and why he addressed the Athenians as he did.

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Some philosophers who did engage in conversation with Paul, did so to sneer at him:

Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said: ‘What does this babblers wish to say?’ Others said: ‘He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities’ – because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection (Acts 17:18).

By calling Paul a ‘babblers’, they were using a highly-derogatory term – ‘seed-gatherer’, ‘one who lounges in the marketplace, making a living by picking up anything that falls off a cart’, ‘beggarly, abject, a parasite’; above all, ‘an empty talker’.<sup>10</sup>

However, for their own reasons – maybe for sport in satisfying their predilection for the hearing of any new teaching, indulging their hobby of ontology-tasting – the philosophers took Paul to the Areopagus to hear more about his ‘new ideas’. They liked his talk – not his doctrine, but his talk. They wanted to hear more. A pleasant diversion for the afternoon or whatever? A kind of jack-in-the box that would jump about for their intellectual amusement? Oh? Luke recorded the scene:

And they took [Paul] and brought him to the Areopagus, saying: ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean’. Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new (Acts 17:19-21).

Expectant silence, I should imagine, fell, as Paul stood up (Acts 17:22),<sup>11</sup> and opened his discourse – and on a pejorative note, at that:

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<sup>10</sup> See Joseph Henry Thayer: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, ninth printing 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Probably motioning with his hand, this seeming to be the usual way of addressing a crowd (Acts 12:17; 13:16; 19:33; 21:40; 26:1).

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Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious (Acts 17:22).

Now this can be misread. It must not. I called this opening 'pejorative'. Let me explain. Paul was not congratulating his hearers, flattering them by praising their spirituality. Not at all! As the AV (KJV) puts it:

Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things [you] are too superstitious.<sup>12</sup>

The Greek word translated 'superstitious' can refer to the fear of gods – a good thing, as some would see it, men showing a reverence for the gods, having a sense of piety and religion; or the word can speak of rank, unadulterated superstition. Joseph Henry Thayer opted for what he called Paul's use of 'kindly ambiguity'. Which is it? Was Paul being complimentary? Or, as I have asserted, confrontational?

Clifford C.Pond:

When Paul calls them religious (AV [KJV] 'superstitious'), he is not commending their religion... Paul is disgusted!... The altars and shrines of the pagans were... places of gross immorality in the name of religion.<sup>13</sup>

Bruce came down – only just, and very gently at that – on the confrontational side:

This characterisation of the Athenians by Paul was not necessarily meant to be complimentary... The expression Paul used could also mean 'rather superstitious'... What was piety to Greeks was superstition to Jews.<sup>14</sup>

Again:

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<sup>12</sup> The 'too' is odd. How much superstition is acceptable? 'Very' would be better than 'too'.

<sup>13</sup> Clifford C.Pond: *Paul... at Athens*, Strict Baptist Mission, Abingdon, p9.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce p335.

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[The] KJV [AV] [rendering] ‘too superstitious’ is not entirely wrong;<sup>15</sup> to Paul, the Athenian religion was mostly superstitious... Too much stress should not be laid on the likelihood of Paul’s commencing his address with a compliment... On the other hand, Paul would not commence his discourse with an insult.<sup>16</sup>

Of course! I am not for a moment suggesting we insult unbelievers. But this is not the alternative to Evans’ cloying methods.<sup>17</sup>

I think it is true to say that a majority of commentators come down on the gracious, complimentary side of the meaning of the word. Indeed, it may be right (with Thayer) to say that Paul intended a ‘kindly ambiguity’. Nevertheless, my own view is that Paul was upfront right from the start. I am asserting that, even with his opening salvo, the apostle confronted his hearers. Let me offer some justification for what I allege.

For a start, Paul could never have praised anybody for showing reverence for gods. He could never have congratulated anybody for their devotion to idols. Never! So, if he was using the word in a complimentary sense, he could only have been flattering his hearers. Flattery? Buttering up his hearers? The man of the apostle’s stamp – the man who wrote the following words – would never, in this context, have fallen back on flattery:

We are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ (2 Cor. 2:15-17).

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<sup>15</sup> But, as I have noted, it is very odd! How much superstition is acceptable? ‘Very’ would be better than ‘too’.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce (Greek) p380.

<sup>17</sup> For example, Paul briefly showed respect in his opening remarks when addressing Agrippa (Acts 26:2-3) (not that he was preaching, but was on trial for his life, please note).

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We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor. 4:2-4).

You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition. For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed – God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else (1 Thess. 2:1-6).

In any case, whether or not Paul spoke in terms of 'superstition' or 'religion', he was being confrontational. He was grieved, angry that his hearers should be deluded; he was distressed. While Karl Marx could talk in terms of 'religion being the opium of the people', he did not go far enough. Religion is not only a drug, a soporific; it is fatal. Satan likes and uses the institutions of religion (2 Thess. 2:4; Rev. 2:9; 3:9).<sup>18</sup> Paul would never preach religion. He would never encourage religion. He had had more than enough of that in his early days as a Jew:

My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee (Acts 26:4-5).

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<sup>18</sup> This is not confined to Jews and synagogues. Take 'temple' (2 Thess. 2:4); see 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:20-22, and so on).

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You have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers (Gal. 1:13-14).

In both passages, the apostle goes on to declare the glorious change he experienced in his conversion to *Christ* – not to ‘the Christian religion’. He certainly made this clear when he wrote to the Philippians:

Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh – though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith – that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Phil. 3:2-11).

In the following, when Paul spoke of ‘worship’, he used the word that is translated ‘religion’ in the above (Acts 26:5), even ‘ritual’, and does so in a critical way:

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship [the word in question] of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind (Col. 2:18).

On the other hand, we do have:



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If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world (Jas. 1:26-27).

Here, 'religion' carries positive overtones. Even so, it is best understood in terms, not of religion, but spirituality, practical godliness: 'Spirituality that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is...'. What we must not do is read back into the Bible 1800 years of Christendom, and then read it back out again.

So, apart from James 1:27,<sup>19</sup> and this qualified as in the preceding paragraph, 'religion' and 'religious' carry negative overtones in the days of the new covenant. Paul, the man who declared the following, would never countenance 'religion' as understood by pagan Greeks:

I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (1 Cor. 9:16).

What we proclaim is... Jesus Christ as Lord (2 Cor. 4:5).

If I may accommodate that last verse, in the present context I think it is fair to say that Paul would declare:

What we proclaim is not religion, but Jesus Christ as Lord.

Consequently, I am of the opinion that Paul opened his address at the Areopagus on a confrontational note. He was not being diplomatic, ingratiating himself, congratulating his hearers, winning their confidence, assuring them that all they needed was a bit of tweaking of their 'religion'. I am sure that both the tone of his voice and his body language would have put this beyond doubt.

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<sup>19</sup> The NIV of 1 Tim. 5:4 – 'put their religion into practice' – is, to say the least, unfortunate, misleading. It should be 'show godliness' (ESV), 'practice piety' (NASB), 'show piety' (AV, KJV), 'practice godliness' (Holman Standard).

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Whatever view may be taken of that, it cannot be denied that, as he went on – even immediately – the apostle made his position clear. As always, Paul went for the jugular, doing so without a whiff of ambiguity. For at once he moved to exposing his hearers’ ignorance, their stupidity – their crassness being blazoned abroad for all to see, with their veneration of ‘an altar with this inscription: “To the unknown god”’ (Acts 17:23)! What ignorance! Moreover, how imprudent of these wiseacres to broadcast it to the world!

Talk about fingers crossed – this is a case of belt, braces and string! Superstition in the raw! Many gods – with one for luck! And Paul exposed it.

Pond:

[Paul] did not begin with a story to make people listen, nor with a humorous allusion to put them in the right mood. He did not even begin with a parable. He began with a concrete example from their life that exposed their folly, and led him immediately to their relationship with God.<sup>20</sup>

As the apostle made clear when writing to the Corinthians:

The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart’. Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men...

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except

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<sup>20</sup> Pond p10.

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Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory... Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written: 'He catches the wise in their craftiness'; and again: 'The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile'. So let no one boast in men (1 Cor. 1:18-25; 2:1-8; 3:18-21).

As he went on addressing the Athenians, Paul proceeded to proclaim the one and only God, the true God, to them, rebuking their ignorance, declaring how God continually works to the end that men might come to him. Quoting back at them – *at them*, I stress – their own poets, the apostle showed, yet again, how witless his hearers were – even their own poets rebuking their madness:

'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said: 'For we are indeed his offspring' (Acts 17:28).

The point must not be missed. Paul was not quoting the pagan poets on a par with Scripture. Nor was he ingratiating himself with his audience, by quoting their bards with approval. Not at all! Rather, he was highlighting his hearers' inconsistency. He was citing their poets to challenge their thinking! How dim-witted they were, 'being', as they claimed, 'God's offspring', 'to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man' (Acts 17:29)! Fancy! Sophisticated men, men who prided themselves on their rationality, such 'enlightened' men with their vaunted worldly wisdom, actually making and

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worshipping an idol crafted out of stone or wood or precious metal and gems! And this, even as they were cherishing the thought that they were, as their own admired poets declared, this god's offspring! How daft can men get! The cleverest of men are spiritually ignorant (1 Cor. 1:18 – 2:16; 3:18-23), and in saying this, Paul, like Nathan addressing David (2 Sam. 12:7), was pointing straight at his hearers.

Pond:

Paul's application begins with an unflattering summing up of the condition of his audience. 'Such ignorance' was a brave comment on the intellectual pride of the Stoics and Epicureans of Athens (1 Cor. 1:20-21).<sup>21</sup>

Paul had yet more to say:

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30-31).

The material point is that Paul got this far in his first meeting with the pagan philosophers! This was his opening (and, as it turned out, his closing) discourse. Having been given the opportunity, he grasped it with both hands. Paul had no thought of process; no softly, softly. Rather, he opened with all guns blazing. A better illustration might be to speak of him, right from the start, drawing his rapier and, deftly wielding it, driving to the very heart of the issue. Obviously, he was not looking for common ground with the world. Not at all! Rather he exposed his hearers' folly. In God's name, he warned them of the coming judgment. He told them of the one who would judge them, the Lord Jesus Christ. He commanded them, in God's name, to admit their error, repent, confess their blindness, and turn. He unequivocally laid out the evidence of Christ's resurrection as God's assurance of the judgment to come. In all this he was flying directly in the face of his

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<sup>21</sup> Pond p19.

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hearers' so-called wisdom, confronting both them and their 'wisdom' with the truth, confounding both them and their arguments.

In my view, Acts 17:16-34 runs entirely counter to Evans' thesis. Take one point. Does Evans expose the folly of the world's thinking? Does he not do the reverse – and then call upon it to justify, if not establish, his thesis?

Here is another. Do not miss the fact that Paul did not invite the pagans to church; there was no church in Athens at the time. Rather, he himself was invited to the Areopagus.

Nor did Paul set up any deeds-ministry to attract pagans.

And the man of Acts 17 who addressed the Athenian philosophers in the Areopagus was the very same man who did not hold back when issuing these statements. Moreover, do not miss where and how Paul *started* when setting out the gospel:

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for

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one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them (Rom. 1:18-31).

Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:5-10).

Paul sang from the same song sheet on all three occasions. And I cannot see that Evans' scheme fits.

On the wider issue, what have others thought?

Kenneth F.W.Prior:

Although Paul's example [in Acts 17] encourages us to adapt our style to those whom we are out to reach, at the same time we must be quite clear and uncompromising in the truth we proclaim. This... is clear from Paul's labours in Athens. Yet it is always tempting, out of a genuine desire to commend our message to unbelieving minds, to make it palatable by sacrificing or playing down any aspect of the truth that is likely to be unpopular. The New Testament churches were not lacking in those who had succumbed to this temptation.

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In Galatia, there were the Judaisers who wanted to modify the basic and vital doctrine of justification by faith to accommodate the prejudices of those with a Jewish background.<sup>22</sup> At Colosse, there were others who thought the doctrine of Christ's person could be adapted to suit the presuppositions of Greek philosophy. Paul himself had every opportunity to feel the same pressures, as he found that both the preaching of the cross and the resurrection were the objects of ridicule to sophisticated Greeks. But Paul persisted with both truths. The cross was to him the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18), while if he dropped the resurrection, what he was left with was futile (1 Cor. 15:17). The pages of church history are full of examples of Christians trying to bridge the gulf between biblical truth and secular thought, and in the process sacrificing vital points of doctrine.<sup>23</sup>

Cornelius Van Til:

So then we conclude that even at Athens Paul did virtually the same thing that he had done in Lystra; he challenged the wisdom of the world. He did what later he did in his letter to the Corinthians when he said: 'Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that [in the wisdom of God] the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God through the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe' (1 Cor. 1:20-21).<sup>24</sup>

Witherington:

[Acts 17:23] strikes a balance notable throughout this speech between making contact with the audience and condemning their idolatry... This way of putting it is not much different from what we find in Romans 1:20-23... Romans 1:22 says their thinking was futile because they rejected what they could know of the true God from creation and so their minds

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<sup>22</sup> The thrust of Galatians is not that there is no justification by the law, but that there is no justification or sanctification by the law. See my *Christ Is All; Sanctification in Galatians*.

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth F.W. Prior: *The Gospel in a Pagan Society: The relevance for today of Paul's ministry in Athens*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1975, p115.

<sup>24</sup> Cornelius Van Til: *Paul at Athens*.

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were darkened... This comports with what is said in Acts 17:27 about pagans groping around in the dark for the true God... The call for repentance at the end shows where the argument has been going all along – it is not an exercise in diplomacy or compromise, but ultimately a call for conversion, after a demonstration of what the Athenians obviously do not truly know about God. Familiar ideas are used to make contact with the audience, but they are used for evangelistic purposes to bolster arguments that are essentially Jewish and Christian in character.<sup>25</sup>

Houssney:

Paul did not approve of Greek philosophy. He did not encourage the Stoics and Epicureans to read their literature in order to find Jesus or to discover redemptive analogies in their literature.

Taken in its entirety, Paul's speech was not irenic. On the contrary, though compassionate throughout, it was confrontational and polemic. He was correctional from beginning to end. He confronted their belief system on several fronts.

Houssney's conclusion could not be more pertinent:

The speech Paul gave at the Areopagus has been used to justify some evangelistic<sup>26</sup> practices that are clearly not biblical. Paul has been made to say just the opposite of what he actually said in his speech.

D.A. Carson issued some salutary warnings:

What is striking is that Paul does not flinch from affirming the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. And that is what causes so much offence that Paul is cut off, and the Areopagus address comes to an end...

Paul does not trim the gospel to make it acceptable to the worldview of his listeners. For Paul, then, there is some irreducible and non-negotiable content to the gospel, content that must not be abandoned, no matter how unacceptable it is to some other worldview. It follows that especially when we are trying hard to connect wisely with some worldview other

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<sup>25</sup> Witherington pp523-524.

<sup>26</sup> Houssney had 'missiological'.



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than our own, we must give no less careful attention to the non-negotiables of the gospel, lest in our efforts to communicate wisely and with relevance, we unwittingly sacrifice what we mean to communicate.<sup>27</sup>

Deffinbaugh:

It would seem to me that much of that which characterises our heathen culture characterises the Christian and our Christian culture [that is, Christendom – DG]... Many of the methods, skills and techniques which are taught Christians are really the products of human minds and human inquiry, and not of biblical revelation.<sup>28</sup> They are not simple, gospel answers to life's problems, but complex and drawn out processes. They do not have the stamp, 'made in heaven', but 'made by man'. Let us ever be alert to those subtle human elements which creep into our theology and practice, in the name of religion [that is, in essence, Christendom – DG], but not in accordance with the gospel. How much of our religion and of our worship is but our own adaptation of God's revelation, or our own re-shaping of God, to make him more to our liking? How much of our worship is God-centered, rather than man-centered, and which focuses on pleasing and serving God, rather than on getting God to serve us, to meet our needs? And how much of our proclamation of the gospel is consistent with Paul's preaching, the proclamation of a simple, straightforward message of man's sin and of coming judgment, of Christ's sacrifice and of salvation for all who would repent and believe? May the gospel shape our worship and our every action, as it did Paul's.

Pond:

There must be a place in our approach to modern pagans, whether in personal witness, tracts, addresses, or on radio or television, for finding points of contact. [But] we will avoid every temptation to be popular.<sup>29</sup>

I have made my position clear. So, I ask again, reader: Does Acts 17:16-34 justify Evans' case, or does it not?

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<sup>27</sup> D.A.Carson: 'Worldview Evangelism – Athens Revisited'.

<sup>28</sup> Sadly, how true! Evans in a nutshell!

<sup>29</sup> Pond p17.

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Before I bring this chapter to a close, let me broaden the question. How does Evans' scheme fit in with the following two passages?

*First:*

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them (Eph. 5:11).

How do the advocates of Relationship Evangelism propose that we should obey the apostolic injunction to expose the fruitless deeds of darkness in the community where we are placed (Eph. 5:11)? In particular, how are we going to expose the fruitless deeds of darkness among those we have attracted to church events, our deeds-ministries, and so on, all of which have been tailored expressly to make pagans feel at home among us? After all, as Evans openly admits, these schemes can take months, if not years, to come to fruition.<sup>30</sup> At what stage does he propose that we should start to expose the fruitlessness of the deeds of the unbelievers we are hoping to influence? Will our deeds ministry do it? If we are doing all we can to attract the world, if we are offering activities and services which cater for what worldings like, saying nothing and doing nothing to 'put them off', how then can we expose their fruitless works of darkness?<sup>31</sup> How can we do that at a

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<sup>30</sup> Evans pp150-152,172-174, for instance.

<sup>31</sup> Let me give an example of Evans' determination to avoid any sort of confrontation. Take his quick overview of the Bible, given to help believers to 'share the story': 'One very helpful outline is called 'Take 5!': 1. God set it up (Gen. 1 – 2). 2. We messed it up (Gen. 3). 3. God calls us back (Gen. 4 – Mal.). 4. God himself came (Matt. – John). 5. What if I follow? God grows relationships (Acts – Jude). What if I don't follow? God will sort evil out (Rev.)' (Evans pp202-203). I shall be brief: Is Acts – Jude about 'God growing relationships'? or the conversion of sinners followed by their personal progressive sanctification under the law of Christ (Matt. 28:18-20, for instance)? But, in connection with the point I am making about lack of confrontation, what about the last of Evans' five points? Yes, 'God will sort evil out'. But is that all? Is that the message of Revelation? How will God sort out evil? In particular,

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meeting or event which has been specially designed to cater for the tastes of the unregenerate, and after months, if not years, of making them welcome at such events? How can we, under those circumstances tell unbelievers, in plain terms, that all the time they have been enjoying the schemes we have designed to make them feel at home and help them with their housing and debt problems, through all that time, we knew that they were living lives of utter fruitless darkness condemned under the wrath of God, and yet did not tell them?<sup>32</sup> Do we admit to them that we didn't do it because we didn't want to put them off? Do we let them in on 'the secret' at a public meeting, or do we do it in private, individually or with a select group of pagans who have ripened sufficiently, and are 'mature' enough in the relationship, and who can, therefore, stand being told the 'bad news'? Have any

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what about judgment? I would say that 'judgment' is one of the main points of the book, even its climax (Rev. 15:4; 16:7; 17:1; 18:10; 19:2; 20:4). And those references are just for the word 'judgment'! The *concept* is written all across the book, not least when dealing with churches (Rev. 2 – 3). Once again, I am not fault-finding for the sake of a word. It is Evans' silence on the concept that is disturbing. Let me not be mealy-mouthed: if we don't have judgment, we don't have the gospel. Look how Paul opened his massive discourse of the gospel in Rom. 1:18-19. And he didn't just mention man's condition and God's wrath did he, get off the subject as soon as he could, and rush on to the pleasant bits? No! He thumped home the wretched state of man and the consequent wrath of God, verse after verse, until Rom. 3:21. It stands out a mile. No sense of wrath? No sense of mercy! No teaching on wrath? No teaching on mercy!

<sup>32</sup> Paul opened his exposition of the gospel in Romans with the wrath of God revealed: 'The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth' (Rom. 1:18). Paul used 'wrath' ten times in Romans. I could not find it once in Evans' book. I found 'wrath of God' in ten verses in the New Testament, 'wrath of Almighty God' and 'wrath of the Lamb' once each, 'his wrath' three times. Evans used 'condemn' only once – when quoting 1 John 3:16-20, which refers to the hearts of believers condemning them. As for the New Testament, I gave up counting when I reached forty.

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advocates of Relationship Evangelism given any thought to this, and issued any public statement on it?<sup>33</sup>

Do not forget that new ‘unchurched’ people (customers) will be being attracted all the time. So, if the church *is* going to confront, will it call a special meeting of those who have been attending for a specified length of time? If not, won’t the newcomers get tipped off too soon? Perhaps the simplest way might be to leave it to the Holy Spirit to do it in his way and time, very much like the way hyper-Calvinists think sinners might be saved: for fear of inviting or commanding the non-elect, it is safer to do nothing.<sup>34</sup>

Have the advocates of Relationship Evangelism thought about all this?

And now the *second* passage, the words of Christ:

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it (Matt. 7:13-14).

I have asked at what stage the advocates of Relationship Evangelism propose to bring out the confrontational. Biblically, there can be only one answer: at the very start. After all, Christ made it plain that the gate – the gate, the entry-point – is narrow. What is more, that narrow gate leads immediately – immediately – to the narrow path. Thus there can be no question: right from the word ‘Go’ we must be upfront and honest with unbelievers. There must be no thought of hiding or playing down the ‘unpalatable’ aspects of the gospel.

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<sup>33</sup> See my *Deceit*.

<sup>34</sup> See my *Offer; No Safety; Septimus Sears; Revisited*.