



**WORLDVIEW MADE PRACTICAL**  
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**Share the "Unknown God" - Part 1**

By Tal Davis

A few years ago I visited a large Hindu temple. I could not help but be impressed by the beautiful and detailed craftsmanship. Our hostess informed us that skilled artisans from a certain priestly caste in India required ten years to do the exquisite sculpture and friezes inside and outside of the building. Inside the temple, surrounding a large open space, were literally hundreds of small idols representing the many gods of Hinduism. At the front of the hall were larger idols of the main Hindu gods (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva) as well as a statue of the elephant god Ganesha.

While we there, all around the periphery of the temple's main hall were people bowing down before various idols and even offering them small gifts of flowers and food. Now understand, this temple was not in Mumbai, Delhi, Hyderabad, or Kolkata (Calcutta) in India where Hindu temples are virtually everywhere. No, this temple was located in none other than Nashville, Tennessee, the buckle of the Bible belt!

Let's face it, as we have discussed many times in these columns, non-Christian, pseudo-Christian, and cultic religions are proliferating in America. All we need do is just look around our communities to see the diverse types of religious movements now common in the USA. Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, Sikhs, and adherents of many other religions are now proliferating in America under the protection of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

So, how do we respond to these trends? Do we have fear? Anger? Or do we see it as something of an opportunity? Followers of Jesus should be aware of those around us who are in those nonchristian religions. In this installment and the next we will examine four important principles for doing evangelism in a religiously diverse and even pagan culture. We use as our model the ministry of the Apostle Paul in his excursion into Athens (Acts 17:16-33), the spiritual and religious capital of the pagan world.

Before we move ahead, however, let's review why we should even bother to do interfaith apologetics and evangelism at all. Many people today, even many professing Christians, feel it is intolerant and immoral to try to persuade someone to change or leave his or her religion. Liberal thinkers believe all religions are essentially the same, so there is no basic reason to favor one over any other. For them, truth is relative and culturally conditioned.

So why, then, do we need to reach out to non-Christians? Three reasons. (To read a complete explanation of these principles see the following previous articles: Why Do We Do Worldview and Interfaith Evangelism? Part 1 - Three Basic Reasons; Why Do We Do Worldview and Interfaith Evangelism? Part 2 - The Biblical Basis - Old Testament; and Why Do We Do Worldview and Interfaith Evangelism? Part 3 - The Biblical Basis - New Testament.)

**REASON ONE: In our highly diverse culture, we need to educate Christian people about the beliefs and practices of other faiths.**

Christians today should have some understanding of other faiths and their followers to minimize misconcep-

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tions and to enhance personal relationships. We need to have a clear understanding of what non-Christian movements believe and practice. Inevitably, we will encounter their followers in our daily lives. They are our neighbors, co-workers, fellow students, and business associates. Therefore, we need to know how to relate to them on a personal basis.

### **REASON TWO: We need to educate Christians because many religions seek to proselytize Christians to their beliefs.**

We must not just educate ourselves about those faiths but we must be prepared to defend our faith (1 Peter 3:15) and not be deceived by false teachers proclaiming false doctrines (2 Corinthians 11:4; Galatians 1:6ff; 2 Peter 2:1; 2 John 7-8). Mormons, Jehovah's Witness, Muslims, and Oneness Pentecostals, are but a few of a number of cults and world religions that focus much of their time and energy on recruiting new members.

Seeking to make converts to one's faith is one of the guarantees in the U.S. Constitution. But we also have the right to refute beliefs we disagree with, especially if they are seeking to proselytize Christians. Unfortunately, too many Christians today are woefully naive when it comes to the beliefs of other faiths. What is desperately needed is a greater degree of discernment. It is our goal to provide resources to meet that need.

### **REASON THREE: We are commanded in the Bible to carry the unique message of salvation to all peoples (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8).**

This may be the most important reason for doing interfaith evangelism. Millions of people in America and around the world put their faith in false gods and hollow belief sys-

tems. The Bible clearly teaches that just being sincere or seeking to live a good life is inadequate for finding salvation.

Our conviction is that salvation is found in no other name but Jesus (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Timothy 2:5-6). Only by repenting of one's sin and putting faith in Jesus Christ (i.e. who He was and what He did) can we receive the free gift of salvation by grace (Ephesians 2:8, 9). Thus, Christians should learn to evangelize those in all worldviews and faith systems in ways that are loving and sensitive, yet uncompromising (Ephesians 4:15).

So how, then, do we go about doing that task in ways that are effective? Let's look at the model of one of the best biblical examples of a multi-cultural evangelist: the Apostle Paul.

In Acts, chapter 17, verses 16-33, Luke (the writer of both the Gospel of Luke and Acts) tells of Paul visiting the ancient Greek city of Athens. At that time, Rome, of course, was the political capital of the Roman Empire. Nonetheless, Athens was, in a real sense, the cultural and religious center of the empire. It was sort of like how New York City functions in the United States today.

### **Paul at Athens - Acts 17:16-21 NASB**

16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols. 17 So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. 18 And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" Others, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities," – because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. 19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we

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know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? 20 For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean." 21 (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)

### **Sermon at the Aeropagus - Acts 17:22-33 NASB**

22 So Paul stood in the midst of the Aeropagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. 23 For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; 25 nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; 26 and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, 27 that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; 28 for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.'

29 Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. 30 Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, 31 because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has

appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."

32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this." 33 So Paul went out of their midst. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

When Paul entered the city he was immediately troubled by the vast idolatry he observed all around (vs. 16). Thousands of shrines, statues, and temples in honor of the Greek gods and goddesses lined the streets. I think I know personally how Paul felt. When I visited the Hindu temple, and to other pagan and pseudo-Christian places of worship, I have experienced a restlessness in my spirit. I believe it is the Holy Spirit providing a sense of discernment that the place is unholy.

The primary worship center in Athens was the Acropolis, where the Parthenon, a huge temple honoring Athena, queen of the gods and the city's patron deity, was located. Paul decided to go initially to the local Jewish synagogue as was his usual practice when entering a town for the first time. At the synagogue, the local Jewish meeting center, a community of Jews and Gentile "God-fearers" regularly met to worship and study (vs. 17). Paul also ventured into the market place to interact with whoever would talk to him. There he encountered some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (vs. 18a).

The Athenians who heard Paul speaking were confused by his new teaching, particularly what he said about Jesus being raised from the dead. Greeks generally believed in the immortality of the soul but did not have a concept of the resurrection of

the body. Some hearers even called Paul a "babbler" (vs. 18b). As a result, he was taken to the Areopagus (the King James Version translates it as "Mars Hill") to face the scholars there (vss. 19-20). The Areopagus was sort of a Athenian debating society where speakers would present new philosophical ideas and others would react. Note that, in verse 21, Luke gave his personal editorial comment on the Greeks. He sarcastically remarked, "Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new" (NASB).

So Paul addressed the men at the Areopagus. Paul used a four pronged strategic process to garner his listeners interest and then to make his arguments to them. In this installment we will look first at his opening monologue. In the next part we will look at the other three aspects of his address and analyze its results. In doing so, we will see how we can follow his model in our encounters with people in non-Christian faiths now.

### **Strategic Prong #1: Paul started where they were at that point in their spiritual lives.**

Paul began his speech by first commending the Athenians, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects" (vs. 22 NASB). Paul recognized their interest in ultimate questions and spiritual issues. He probably had learned some Greek philosophy when he studied with the great Jewish Rabbi Gamaliel. So Paul wisely started with a point of positive contact and not with belligerence. If he had immediately attacked their philosophers and religious ideas they would have totally shut him out.

The key principle here is that Christians, even now, must start witnessing at the point of a person's spiritual interest and knowledge. Someone who has been raised in a non-Christian environment with no learning about the Bible or Jesus will not comprehend the basics of the Gospel. They won't even know the terminology. Furthermore, if we immediately denounce their faith tradition they will turn us off completely.

That's why we should start by acknowledging some positive aspects of their ideas, then move on to sharing our faith. For example, if we encounter a Jehovah Witness, we may start by saying something like this, "I believe you are sincere in your faith and belief in Jehovah God. I believe in the One True God also." Or, perhaps when talking with a Buddhist we

might acknowledge the good moral principles of the Eight Fold Path. And, as with Jehovah's Witnesses, you can find common ground with Muslims at the point of belief in one God.

That being said, just finding some positive commonalities to initiate a conversation does not mean we accept their beliefs as valid, as Postmodernists contend. At some point we will have to confront them with the exclusive truth of Jesus Christ and the Gospel, which may be offensive to them. The Bible says the Gospel is a stumbling block and foolishness to adherents of other faiths.

"For the word of the cross is foolishness 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 cleverness of the clever I will set aside.' Where is the wise man? 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 through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." (1 Corinthians 1:18-25 NASB)

So, we can expect many people will be put off by the exclusive claims of the Gospel. However, let's do all we can to make sure it is the Gospel message that offends them, not our bad attitudes, prejudices, or behaviors. We should do all we can to speak the truth in the love of Jesus to everyone, even if it is not reciprocated.

In the next installment we will look at the other three strategic prongs Paul utilized in his witness to the Athenians. We will see how he moved his audience from his initial statements to the real issue of the Gospel, and see what was accomplished in doing so.

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