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Share the "Unknown God" - Part 2

By Tal Davis

Sermon at the Aeropagus - Acts 17:22-33 NASB
22 So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus 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.

In the last installment (see: <http://www.marketfaith.org/2015/04/share-the-unknown-god-part-1/>) we discussed how non-Christian and cultic religions are now growing in numbers in America. Home grown groups like Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses continue to add new converts annually. But also the influx of world religions from outside of America is on-going with greater numbers of Hindus, Buddhists, Baha'is, and, perhaps most of all, Muslims.

So we asked, 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 non-Christian religions.

In this installment we will continue our examination of four important principles for doing evangelism in a religiously diverse and even pagan culture. Our model is the Apostle Paul, who ventured into the pagan bastion of Athens, in Greece. (Acts 17:16-23).

Paul was greatly disturbed by the idolatry he saw throughout the city (vs. 16). Shrines, statues, and temples in honor of the hundreds of Greek gods and goddesses lined the streets. Paul spoke about Jesus in the marketplace and so was taken to the Areopa-

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gus, the Athenian philosophical forum, to be questioned (vss. 19-20).

Paul boldly spoke to the men and women gathered at the Areopagus. He used a four pronged strategic process to garner his listener's interest and then to make his arguments to them. In the first installment we looked at his beginning argument (Strategic Prong #1: Paul started where they were at that point in their spiritual lives). In this part we will look at the other three dimensions of his rhetorical approach. These four points make for a good model for evangelizing non-Christian religionists today.

Strategic Prong #2: Paul Pointed them to the One True God. (Acts 17:23-29)

As we indicated in part one, 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 began with a positive affirmation and not antagonism. He then moved forward to the next step in his rhetoric.

As we said before, the city of Athens was filled with shrines and idols in honor of the hundreds of gods and goddesses found in their mythology. Perhaps as a child you read the exciting adventures of the Greek deities (Roman names in parenthesis) such as Zeus (Jupiter); Hera (Juno); Aphrodite (Venus); Apollo (Apollo); and Athena (Minerva), the city's patron goddess. Apparently, however, the Greeks were afraid offending some god who they did not know about or whose name they had not heard. So, in order to placate that god or gods, they made an extra shrine inscribed "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD" (vs. 23a).

So Paul pointed out to the people at the Aeropagus that he had seen

that inscription while wandering through town. He then audaciously told them, "Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you" (vs. 23b). Paul proceeded to tell them of the One True God. He detailed four specific facts about God, all of which contradicted their understanding of deity. First, he explained that God does not dwell in temples (vs. 24). Second, he informed them that He does not need human servants (vs. 25). He then said, third, that God had made all people, of all races, and in all places, "from one man" (vss. 26-28). He was, of course, talking about Adam. (By the way, this indicates that all humans are the same in God's sight). Finally, fourth, he asserted that the true God was not, nor could ever be, represented by idols (vs. 29).

The first task in doing Christian apologetics is to point people to the truth of God. When talking to atheists, we have to begin with the existence of God, period. Christians should be familiar with the reasonable arguments as to why we can believe in the eternal and infinite Creator God (1 Pet. 3:15). We can start by asking them a few basic questions which atheism cannot answer. For one, we can ask, "If God does not exist, then why does anything exist? How did the universe begin?" Another tough question is, "If there is no God, then how did life begin?"

Most people already believe in some kind of god. But the issue does end just with the existence of a god or gods (the Greeks were already there). Like Paul, we must help them understand who is the right God. Unfortunately, many religions, even some calling themselves Christian, have inadequate and unbiblical notions of deity. For example, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) teaches that God, who they call Heavenly Father, is an exalted male human being with a physical body of flesh and bone. On the other hand, Hindus, New Agers, and other pantheists teach that

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god is everything and everything is god.

Strategic Prong #3: Paul focused on the person and work of Jesus Christ. (Acts 17:30-31)

After Paul had clarified the nature of the True God, he then explained that God desired all people repent and worship only Him (vs. 30). He warned them of a coming day of judgment through "a man He had appointed" who had proven His authority by being raised from the dead (vs. 31). He was, of course, pointing them to Jesus Christ as the unique and only Son of God.

The Gospel message of salvation through Christ is still for all people and people groups in all time. There is only one way to bridge the chasm between man and God ("And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved." Acts 4:12 NASB).

In our witnessing to those of other faiths, we must focus on Jesus as the way of salvation. This is where it often gets tough. Many people consider the claim that salvation is only through Jesus as intolerant or narrow minded. Also, people have many varying ideas about who Jesus was and what He did. Muslims regard Jesus as a prophet (less important than Muhammad). Most Jewish people deny that Jesus was the Messiah, but some may say He was a great rabbi (teacher). Jehovah's Witnesses believe Jesus, in His preexistent form, was "the Son of God" or was "a god" (meaning an angel), but not equal to Jehovah God.

Strategic Prong #4: Because he was bold in his message, Paul got people to listen and elicited responses. (Acts 17:32-34)

Paul finished his speech and the people in the Aeropagus responded. They especially reacted to the idea of

a resurrection from the dead (vs. 32a). That was not a concept the Greeks were familiar with. Most of them believed in some kind of immortality of the soul, but usually apart from any physical dimension. Consequently, different ones of them responded in various ways. Luke reports that some of them sneered and derided Paul and his assertions (vs. 32b). Others remained skeptical but, nonetheless, asked to hear more from Paul (vs. 32c).

Finally, however, Luke plainly states, "But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them" (vs. 34. NASB). Note that Luke identifies two of them by name. These were real people that Luke met and interviewed about God working in their lives through Paul's preaching.

When we witness for Jesus we will also get responses – some negative and some positive. In my more than forty-five years as a Christian and a minister, I think I have heard them all. Some people will scorn us as narrow minded and intolerant. Some will laugh at us and deride us as ignorant fools. However, some will be interested and want to hear more about it. And, then, some will hear the message and believe! The Holy Spirit works in the hearts of people to open them to the truth of the Gospel, but it is up to them to make the decision. Our responsibility is to tell them.

Like Paul, we still must share the "Unknown God." We should do all we can in this increasingly secular and pagan society to make Him "unknown" no more. We look around and see people drowning in sin and living in spiritual darkness, so we must show the love of Jesus Christ and be bold to share Him with others.

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