

(Postmodern Times) Apostolic Evangelism

by D.A. Carson

Paul's apostolic evangelism in postmodern times requires adapting to pluralism, biblical illiteracy, and competing worldviews, while prioritizing preaching to those with a shared heritage and engaging people in the marketplace.

Duration: 55:31

Scripture: Matthew 7:1, John 3:16, Acts 13:16-41, Acts 17:30-31

Topics: "Postmodern"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the challenges of preaching the gospel to biblical illiterates, particularly in university missions. He emphasizes the importance of helping people understand the big picture of the Bible before they can fully grasp the message of salvation. The speaker also highlights the shift in God's approach to ignorance, stating that now everyone is commanded to repent because a day of justice has been set in the future. He explains that Paul faced similar challenges when preaching to the people in Athens, who were unfamiliar with the Scriptures. The sermon concludes by emphasizing the need to follow Paul's example and prioritize preaching the gospel to those who may not have a strong biblical foundation.

Transcript

I would like to begin this morning by directing your attention to the book of Acts, chapter 17, beginning at verse 16. Acts 17, 16, to the end of the chapter. Acts 17, 16.

Hear then what Scripture says. While Paul was waiting for them, that is, for Silas and Timothy, mentioned in earlier verses, while Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.

A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, what is this babbling trying to say? Others remarked, he seems to be advocating foreign gods. They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, may we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears and we want to know what they mean. All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time

doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas. Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, Men of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious.

For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription, to an unknown god. Now, what you worship as something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth, and does not live in temples built by hands.

And he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth, and he determined the time set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being.

As some of your own poets have said, we are his offspring. Therefore, since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image made by man's design and skill. In the past, God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, for he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed.

He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, we want to hear you again on this subject. At that, Paul left the council.

A few men became followers of Paul and believe. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris, and a number of others. So reads the word of God.

I want to show you this morning the realities Paul faces, the priorities Paul adopts, the framework Paul establishes, and the non-negotiable gospel Paul preaches. First, the realities Paul faces. Here, there is a remarkable pluralism.

Paul is now not evangelizing in a synagogue, where everybody shares his framework and his scripture. Now he is dealing with people in Athens, many of whom have never heard of Moses, never read the scriptures, and who adopt quite a wide variety of religions. Here is a remarkable pluralism not completely unlike downtown Toronto.

He deals in particular with some Stoics here and some Epicureans. We'll find out more about them in a moment. And then he's in the marketplace dealing with all kinds of different people.

In fact, in the Roman Empire, it was part of imperial policy to encourage pluralism. When the Romans, for example, took over some new turf, they arranged for a god swap. They insisted that some of the locals adopt some gods from the Roman pantheon, and meanwhile the Romans adopted some of the gods from this new territory, and their reasoning was purely political, like most such reasoning.

You see, hundreds of years earlier, the superpowers of the day, when they were afraid of local revolt, they adopted quite a different stance. You can read about it in the Old Testament pages. When the superpowers took over some new turf, they knew that people were likely to rebel if there was some sort of nexus of religion and land and people.

You get those three going together, and there is powerful incentive to rebel. Our gods, connected with our land and our people, will shove off the chains, the yoke of this superpower. So what they did was they transported the people into other lands.

They took away the upper echelons of society, the tradespeople, the aristocracy, the nobility. They transported them hundreds of miles away. And this broke the nexus, you see, with the land.

And it even made the god connection a little unsure, because the gods were connected with the land. And that's why, from the Assyrian point of view and the Babylonian point of view, they transported so many Jews so far away, you see. But that proved to be a decidedly uneconomic policy, because you break up these units of society, such that they're no longer on their home turf with their own industries and their own trades and their own crafts and their own network of commercial enterprises, and suddenly the tax base for the empire is threatened.

So eventually that whole policy was shoved aside. What the Romans did instead was swap gods. You don't move people out of the land, you swap the gods.

And then if there's a rebellion, well, it's not very clear which side which god is on. And what that proves is a bit of a disincentive to rebellion. You see, it was a very shrewd policy.

But what it also meant, of course, was that religious pluralism was rife all over the empire. For different reasons and for different political purposes today, it's right today, too. And in fact, it's not all bad.

In part, it exposes us to the sheer diversity of the world. I know that some people like to be in churches in the middle of Nebraska. All white farmers.

But after all, heaven's going to be full of people, drawn from every tongue and tribe and people and nation, so I would want to argue that in certain respects, downtown Toronto's a little more like heaven than Nebraska is. Now, you still have to get people ready to go there, but on the other hand, I like the diversity and the colour. I even like walking down the street and smelling the smells of a Turkish restaurant and the smells of a Chinese restaurant, the smells of an Italian restaurant.

I don't want to eat just hamburgers. So, the diversity can be a good thing. But when it extends then to a philosophical perspective that begins to say, and all opinions in this matter of religion are equally valid, and all religions equally lead to God, and to say anything different is to be a hateful person, then clearly we have moved beyond empirical pluralism to a kind of policy statement that makes it impossible for the God who is there to speak.

Now, there is nothing ever to repent of, no God to turn to, because my opinion is simply right. Now, Paul faced that in the first century. This is nothing new.

You can read it across the pages of all of Scripture, people turning to their own gods, of one fashion or another. The question, however, is this. If God has spoken, if he has disclosed himself definitively somewhere, then it will be upon us, it will be our onus to turn to him.

Paul is a cosmopolitan man. Paul likes the sheer diversity. But when he comes to the question of the truth claims of God, there he addresses his culture with conviction and passion.

Now, secondly, you notice amongst the realities Paul faces this massive biblical illiteracy. Now he is teaching, we are told, not only verse 17 in the synagogue, with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, therefore with people who understand something of the Bible background, but in the marketplace, day by day. You're now hundreds of miles away from the eastern end of the Mediterranean.

You're dealing with people who have never read the Bible. They've never heard of Moses. They've never heard of John the Baptist.

They've never heard of Isaiah. And moreover, the framework they adopt is very different from this Jewish framework. And he must proclaim, verse 18, the good news, the gospel about Jesus and the resurrection to them.

Now that is extremely important too in our generation, is it not? For it used to be that all of our evangelism was bound up with sharing our faith with people who had more or less bought in to our presuppositions and the Judeo-Christian heritage. That is no longer the case. Many of the people whom we evangelize, either because they are recent immigrants and have brought packages from elsewhere, or because we live in a largely post-Christian culture that has moved away from that inheritance, as a result we are now dealing today with people who are largely biblically illiterate.

If they've heard of Moses, they confuse him with Charlton Heston. And as a result, they don't know anything about the Bible storyline. Even if they've heard of Jesus, the game rules have all changed.

When I was a boy, if there was one verse that was known throughout the culture, it was John 3.16. Nowadays, if there's one verse from the Bible that people know about, what is it? Not John 3.16. They don't even know where it's from. But they know, judge not that you be not judged. That's the best-known verse in the whole Bible in Western culture today.

From Matthew 7.1. Judge not that you be not judged. Who are you to tell me what to do or what to believe in? Doesn't your own Bible say, judge not that you be not judged? Who are you to tell me not to sleep around? I mean, judge not that you be not judged. Of course, a text without a context becomes a pretext for a proof text.

A little farther on, in the very same paragraph of Matthew 7, there you find Jesus also going on to say, don't cast your pearls before swine, which means somebody's got to figure out who the pigs are. You see, in the context, what is at issue is, don't be judgmental, don't look down your long, self-righteous nose at other people. It is not saying, be completely morally indifferent, and it doesn't really matter whether you respect Mother Teresa or Hitler.

I mean, judge not that you be not judged. The whole of the Bible is against such rubbish. So what people are using, therefore, is a text ripped out of its context in order to have a complete abandonment of a moral perspective whatsoever.

That is about the extent of biblical knowledge in many, many, many Canadian and American families today, isn't it? So, like that sort of stance, Paul, likewise, faces a situation with massive biblical illiteracy. And the question is, what does he do about it? And then in the third place, it's worth noticing that, in particular, once he gets into the Adeopagus, he is dealing with particular worldviews. You see, when we do not know the Judeo-Christian heritage, when we do not know our Bibles, it is not that we then know nothing, but that we replace that heritage with something else.

It's not as if people who don't know their Bibles are like hard drives, with nothing written on them whatsoever. Rather, they're like hard drives with endless cluttering files all over the place, all interlocked. And to get out of that hard drive with the Gospel, you have to erase some files.

In other words, there's some unlearning as well as some learning that must take place. It's not as if you're coming to people with a blankness to them, and then you say, well, here's the truth, and they say, yes, I hadn't thought of that. Now you're dealing instead with people with another perspective.

In this case, we're told a Stoic perspective, or an Epicurean perspective. We're told that explicitly. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him.

We must even understand this word philosophy a little differently from the first century than today. Today, philosophy is a minor subject in small departments of well-endowed universities for the intellectually gifted. In the first century, philosophy meant more or less what we mean by worldview.

These various roaming philosophers tried to capture the public attention in the marketplace of ideas and establish a whole framework for understanding reality, a whole worldview, an outlook, and there were competing philosophies in the marketplace of ideas. So these people were not only intellectuals and trying to train the next generation of intellectuals, they were competing in the marketplace of ideas for stamping their way of looking at things in terms of how to live, how to live a good life. What is the good life? That is what Paul was dealing with.

The ideal of Epicurean philosophy was an undisturbed life, a life of tranquility untroubled by undue involvement in human affairs. The gods themselves, according to the Epicureans, are composed of atoms so fine that they live in the calmness in the spaces between other atoms and in the spaces between the worlds, and thus they are unbothered by all the hurly-burly of the rest of the atoms and the rest of the worlds. As the gods are nicely removed from the hurly-burly of life, so human beings should seek the same ideal.

But over against that philosophy, that worldview, Paul, we shall see, presents a god who is actively involved in this world as its creator, its providential ruler, its judge, and its self-disclosing saviour. It's an alternative view. Stoic philosophy thought of God as all-pervasive, more or less in a pantheistic sense, that is, in a sense in which all of reality is somehow connected with God and God is connected with all of reality.

That's why in a lot of ancient Greek religion you can move back and forth between talking about the gods, plural, individual gods, and God, singular. But when the ancient Greeks speak of God singular, they don't mean God the way we mean God, that is, a personal transcendent sovereign who's over all the others. They mean God more or less in a pantheistic sense.

There is sort of a god-ness behind all of the other individual gods. It's much closer, in a sort of a worldview-ish sense, to a lot of presuppositions in New Age thought. Let the force be with you, you see.

Now, the Stoics thought that God was all-pervasive, more or less in a pantheistic sense, so that the human ideal was to live life in line with what is ultimately real, to conduct life in line with this God or this principle of reason, which must rule over emotion and passion. Stoicism was marked by great moral fervor, a high sense of duty, genuine earnestness, discipline, hard work. Against such a vision, the God Paul presents, far from being pantheistic, is personal.

He talks, he interacts with other persons made in his image, he's not confused with the universe, he's distinct from the creation, and he's our final judge. Instead of focusing on universal reason, tapped into by human reasoning, Paul contrasts the divine will and sovereignty with human dependence and need. It is an entirely different vision, and Paul realizes he must erase some of their mental files and substitute others.

Now, those are parts of the realities that Paul faces. Second, the priorities that Paul adopts. First of all, as is typical for Paul here and elsewhere in his ministry, he preaches to those with a shared heritage.

Do you see what the text says? While Paul was waiting for his friends and his co-workers, his trainees, in fact, in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. Now, already that says a great deal. That says that Paul does not look at a culture merely from the impressive stature of its buildings.

The Pantheon was there, which you can still go and see today. The Acropolis, with all of its wonderful buildings, was there. You can still go and see what's left of them today.

He wasn't impressed by the glorious tradition of high learning and literature. He was depressed by its idols. Here was a man who looked at a culture so far as he could from God's perspective.

And then no matter how learned, no matter how architecturally brilliant, if it was a culture filled with idols, it was depressing to Paul. So what did he do? Well, he began with people who had his givens. So, we're told, despite all of these idols, despite all of this situation, he realizes there must be a Christian church.

He starts with people who are closest to him. He reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks. That was his first priority.

Now, partly for Paul, that's a God-given assumption, that the Jews have a certain kind of prior claim on the Gospel because God had dealt with the Jews across so many centuries. So he says the Gospel is to the Jew first and also to the Gentiles, and he works that out in his own life by beginning in the synagogue every place that he goes. So he does it here, too.

Now, in our own situation, this means that if we start charting through how to reach neighbors who know nothing of the Gospel, we must not neglect, entirely, people with a kind of churchy background, middle-class WASP background. There are still some people in Canadian culture, a declining number, but still some people in Canadian culture with a background of the shared Judeo-Christian heritage, and one must work with them and evangelize them in more or less traditional ways. But then the second element in his strategy, then, is to reach outside those circles to people who know nothing about that background.

So, he reasons not only in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, but also in the marketplace, day by day, with those who happen to be there. Now, of course, in the first century, the marketplace was not only the shopping mall, it was also the place where people chatted, it was where people talked. And what that equivalent place is today varies enormously from city to city, from culture to culture, but you have to find places where you can engage people who know nothing and talk.

Now, there are different ways of doing that. In some places, in more rural places, door-to-door visitation is a very good way of starting. But in a built-up city, it's often a very bad and inefficient way of starting.

I live now near Chicago, which is a metropolitan city of 12 million people, about the size of London, England. And there are many people who live out in the suburbs now who get on the train at 5.30, 6 in the morning. They go into town and they work hard all day.

Many of them are middle class, upper middle class, business executive types, and they work there often 12 hours a day, get on the train, come back. By the time they reach home, it's 8 o'clock at night, and they don't want somebody knocking on the door, saying, I've come to share Jesus with you. When they get home, home is their castle, home is their reserved place of tranquility, and knocks on the door are simply not welcome.

You're just being rude. You don't understand. So we gave a number of our students a few years back the assignment, how are you going to talk to such people? And then do it.

Well, one group of enterprising students looked at this very closely, and they thought, try to think things through. Should we try and have businessmen's lunches downtown? There are some churches in downtown Chicago running businessmen's lunches downtown for precisely these kinds of people. But these people, these students, developed another tactic.

They decided for a month to get on the same train in the same car every day. And guess what? They found that 95 or 98% of the people on the train were the same people in the same car every day. Because people get on the same train every day, they stand in the same place on the platform every day, the same train goes by and stops at the same place every day, so they get on the same car every day.

And by two weeks, they had evangelistic Bible studies going in the train in and out of Chicago every day. There are ways of doing it. But sooner or later, whether it's in the marketplace of the ancient world, or by email today, or on the trains, or in lunches for business people, or in Saturday men's breakfast, or whatever it is, you must find some place where people gather and talk, in a coffee clatch or wherever, and begin to talk.

And then out of this talking, with people who know nothing about the Gospel, may come all kinds of other things. In Paul's case, no less than the Adeopagus itself. But it's not as if he started with the Adeopagus.

It's not as if he started with the intellectual elite. It's not as if he started by booking a room and giving a lecture. He started by gossiping the Gospel with ordinary people, until he was so much drawn to the attention of people that people were inviting him on board to chat and talk and give lectures.

And that is something we too need to absorb. Now before I press on to my third point, I want to make a small excursus. For there are some people you know who say that Paul, in Acts 17, actually made a big mistake.

You may have heard that view. What they argue is that elsewhere, up until now, Paul has just preached Jesus. But now, because he's in Athens, and he's a bit intimidated by all of these first-class, Ivy League-type intellectuals, he goofs.

He embarks on a philosophical defense of Christianity, and the sad result is that he hardly gets any converts. Hence, verse 34, a few men became followers of Paul and believed. Pretty pathetic for all of this intellectual endeavor.

And then you really find out what Paul thought when you realize that when he went on to the next town, which was Corinth, he reverted to his primary approach and preached the Gospel. Isn't that what you read in 1 Corinthians? That is the first letter that he writes back to the Corinthian church afterwards? I resolved, he said, when I was among you, to know Jesus Christ and Him only. I resolved to preach Christ crucified.

Good old Paul, he got back on track and left all this philosophical stuff to one side. Now, there are not many who argue that today, but there are still some who do. And it is so mistaken of you that it is worth my while taking two or three minutes to refute it.

Some reasons why that interpretation is profoundly mistaken. Number one, it is not the natural reading of the book of Acts. That is to say, that reading of the book of Acts depends in part by choosing a little section from Corinthians and reading it back into Acts in a certain kind of way.

But if you're just reading the book of Acts by itself, which is the way you're supposed to read the book, there is no flag when you get to chapter 17 saying, now at this point, dear old Paul goofs. Luke doesn't present the story that way. He presents what Paul does in Pisidian Antioch in chapter 14.

He presents the Jerusalem Council in chapter 15. He presents the Philippian jailer in chapter 16. He presents Athens in chapter 17.

And there is no flag saying, but at this point Paul was wrong. It is not a natural reading of the book of Acts. Second, Acts 17 is in fact entirely in line with Paul's own theology.

If you read through this sermon closely, we will be scanning it in just a moment, you will discover that virtually every point that Paul makes here is worked out in greater length in Romans. This is Pauline theology. This is what he did teach.

You just have it together in a particular kind of package for a particular reason that we'll see in a moment. Number three, transparently Paul here was cut off. You see, he does get to Jesus by the end.

He comes to the end of the sermon and he speaks about God being the God of justice. He has given proof of this to all men by raising this man Jesus from the dead. Now, you know where Paul is going now.

You must understand that an adiapagus address was even longer than this sermon. It went on for hours, and I promise you I won't. But Paul did.

That means that every sentence, every clause here, was a point or a sub-point. On each point you must understand that Paul unpacks quite a bit and lays it all out. What we are getting here is a kind of outline.

Do we know where Paul would go once he's now introduced Jesus? Yes, of course we know. We have already been told earlier on in this same chapter that in the marketplace, dealing with biblical illiterates, he was busy preaching the good news, the gospel. He was preaching the gospel.

Of course that's what he was doing. And so now likewise, if he hadn't been cut off because of his business about the resurrection, he would have gone on to talk much more about Jesus and Jesus' death and his resurrection and the gift of the Spirit and all the rest of the things that go into a whole, full-blown presentation. We'll come to that in due course.

Moreover, 1 Corinthians does not cast Paul's resolution to preach the cross against a failure in Athens. Rather, 1 Corinthians presents Paul's resolution to preach the cross against Corinthian preferences for

intellectual wisdom. Do you remember how 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 runs? 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 pictures these people wanting the kind of wisdom of the world.

They had a lot of stoic and other philosophers in Corinth who were mightily impressed by intellectual arguments. In those days, there was a tremendous emphasis on rhetoric, on how you said things. It was sometimes more important how you said things than what you said.

And by contrast, Paul says, I didn't come with a preaching of wisdom. I didn't come with eloquence. I came with the truth of the gospel, and I resolved when I was among you to preach Christ and Him crucified.

Paul does not say in 1 Corinthians that he changed his mind and went back to what he used to do, or that he had made a mistake earlier and now was getting back on track. He is saying, when I came to you, I came, in fact, with what I always do. I preached Christ crucified and refused to succumb to the dictates of mere impressing people by eloquence and the gymnastics of fine rhetoric.

And moreover, Paul, at this point in his life, was not a rookie right out of seminary. A rookie right out of seminary might make a whole lot of serious mistakes, but by this point in his life, Paul's been in the ministry for almost 20 years. He was converted as a grown man, and during that 20 years, he's been beaten up, he's been stoned, he's been shipwrecked, he has been left for dead, he has faced persecution, he has faced hunger, he has faced church planting situations and several situations.

There is no way, at this point, that Paul is snookered by a couple of intellectuals in a place like Athens, you see. He is a man who has already worked out his philosophy of ministry and is not going to be easily derailed. But above all, I draw your attention to the last verse in the chapter.

I will drop just a hint at this point and then come back to this point at the end. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. We are not to think that this expression means only a few and that was it.

In fact, the original says certain people believed, a fairly common Lucan way of saying what people believe. The point, however, here is that they became followers of Paul, comma. And in becoming followers of Paul, they heard more of the Gospel and subsequently believed.

Now I'll come back to that point because it is very important for understanding what is going on in this chapter. So, my point in this excursus is very simple. This passage before us, here in Acts 17, is perhaps the most important passage in the entire New Testament on the question, how do you preach the Gospel to biblical illiterates? Because here you find an apostle doing it.

That's not what you find Paul doing in the city of Antioch in Acts chapter 13. There you have a long sermon by Paul or Acts 2, a long sermon by Peter. And in both cases, they are preaching to people who know their Bibles.

And therefore, they are quoting the Bible constantly and they are doing their exegesis and they are proving that Jesus really is the promised Messiah after all and so forth. There is a shared worldview. But here you find an apostle preaching the Gospel to biblical illiterates.

That's extremely important. This material is in here precisely so that we have a model of how to do it. So we discover then, first, the realities Paul faces, second, the priorities Paul adopts, and now third, the framework that Paul establishes.

Look how he begins. Men of Athens, verse 22. I see that in every way you are very religious.

Now he uses a term that is neither blessing the religion and saying it's good or cursing it and saying it's bad. It's merely observing that they are very religious. They will doubtless take it as a compliment.

Four, he says, as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription to an unknown god. Now, we have not found that altar. Archaeology has not yet turned that up.

It may someday. But you can understand why it was created. You see, in the ancient world the gods were finite, and they had their own sphere of primary operation.

So if you were going on a sea voyage, you might offer a sacrifice to Neptune, the god of the sea, because Neptune's the one for keeping the winds and the waves in decent order. If you're going to war, then you offer some sacrifice to Zeus. If you're going to give a lecture, then you offer some sacrifice to Hermes, the god of communication.

The gods have their various spheres. But there were so many spheres, so many gods, so many languages, so many people, so many tribes, so many concerns, you couldn't possibly remember them all. So you erected an altar to an unknown god.

Sort of a catch-all, in case there's any I left. I'm a bit scared that I might miss some blessing in my life. So you erect an altar to an unknown god and offer sacrifice there.

But Paul discerns in this a profound, implicit confession that therefore these people don't know God at all. They're running out of fear. They don't know how the gods work.

They don't know who's going to zap them and who's not. Never ever get the idea that people who live in a pagan culture are all loving, friendly, happy types until you come along with a nasty mix of Christianity and Calvinism and make them miserable. That's not the way it is.

Those of us who have spent some time in so-called primitive cultures know how much the religions and gods of such cultures impose tremendous fear and restraint. What he's saying is that these people are religious alright, but they're running so scared they even have idols to unknown gods. Now he says, what you worship is unknown, I'm going to tell you.

For God is known. God is known. God is self-disclosing.

God is knowable and I'm going to tell you about it. Now can you imagine how he's got their interest at this point? Now look very quickly through the body of the sermon itself to see what kinds of emphases Paul makes. Remember now that each clause would have been a point that might have taken him 10, 15, 20, 25 minutes to expound in length.

The God who made the world and everything in it. What have you got here? Two massive points, maybe three already. First, there is a difference between God and the created order.

What this does is rule out pantheism. God is not the same as the whole created order. God is different from the created order.

Second, you've got a doctrine of creation. That is, not only is this created order different from God, but this created order has been made by God and therefore is not God. Do you see? It is establishing a relative hierarchy already.

This means implicitly, when you start working it out, that it is wrong to worship the sun, or it is wrong to worship vegetation gods, or it is wrong to worship anything in the created order. These are gifts from God, but they are not God. And the very heart of idolatry, according to Paul, when he lays this out in his own theological writings elsewhere, in Romans chapter 1, the heart of idolatry is to worship the created thing rather than the creator.

Now in pantheism, that all gets mushed up together. In God's gracious self-disclosure in scripture, there's a fundamental difference. God alone is God, and he was there before anything else was.

And then he created all things, everything in it. In fact, if you push a little further, there's a third implication in all of this that is teased out elsewhere by Paul, and it's hinted at a little farther on in the sermon. It also follows that if we are made in the image of God, we owe him.

You see, it is the doctrine of creation, biblically speaking, that grounds human responsibility. Why do you owe God? Why are you responsible to God? Because he made you. He made you for himself.

And if you do not see the implications of this, that is already a terrible and tragic mark of how lost you are. You think you are autonomous? You think you brought yourself into being? You think you control your own world, your own universe? You have no obligation to the one who made you? You see, biblically speaking, the doctrine of creation grounds all human responsibility. It grounds all human accountability.

We were made by him and for him. Not only is this the God of creation, then, he's the God of providence, of sovereign providence. God made the world and everything in it, and he is the Lord of heaven and earth.

He is sovereign over the whole lot. Not some tribal deity bound up with one domain of life. A sea God, or a vegetation God, or just a Jewish God, or a black God, or a white God, or a Korean God.

No, no, no. He's God. Lord of heaven and earth.

Not some tribal deity. Moreover, he can't be domesticated by religion. Do you see what the text says? He is the Lord of heaven and earth and he does not live in temples built by hands.

Now, Paul is not denying that God manifested himself supremely in the great temple of the Jewish inheritance by God's own decree and design. But even the Old Testament writers they acknowledge again and again and again that God can't be reduced to the temple. At the dedication of the temple there is Solomon praying, Lord, Lord, heaven, the heaven of heavens cannot contain you and will you manifest yourself here in this little temple that I've built? Do you see the best of the Jewish writers in the Old Testament? They're constantly recognizing that God can't be finally domesticated by religious rights.

Even the rights that God himself has prescribed. It's not as if you stroke God by the right kinds of religious rights so that he smiles on you. And then if you forget the right kind of religious rights, he kicks you in the backside.

You see, he's not that kind of God. He can't be domesticated. He can't be predicted.

He can't be controlled. He can't be manipulated. He's bigger than all of that.

He's the sovereign of the universe. And he rules over everything. Moreover, verse 25, he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything.

The Puritans had an expression for this. They called him the God of Aseity. Now that's a word that has fallen out of the English language but we should restore it.

It comes from the Latin a-se, which means from himself. The God of Aseity means the God who is from himself. That is, he is from himself, by himself, and he does not need other beings to enjoy himself or to justify his own existence.

He is not dependent on other beings. Today we sometimes speak of the God of self-existence. That's part of it, but it's only part.

Today when we speak of the God of self-existence we mean that other things are created by him. Their existence is not dependent upon themselves but upon him. The rest of the universe is not self-existent.

It was brought into being by him. But Aseity goes beyond creation to say that God, quite frankly, doesn't need us. Pagan gods were quite miserable unless you stroked them the right way.

They could be quite bad-tempered if you didn't give them the right sacrifices in due course. But God's happiness finally does not turn on us. Isn't he the God who says in the Old Testament if I were hungry would I turn to you? The cattle on a thousand hills are mine.

Hey, if I wanted a Big Mac I've got my own cows, thank you. The whole show is mine. You see, it's not as if God needs us.

As if God is in heaven impotently wringing his hand saying, oh, I'm so frustrated. All those people aren't loving me enough. As if God is miserable all the time because we don't come up to his standards.

He's the God of us, say it. He doesn't need anything. That's what the Bible says.

In fact, the reverse is true. He is not served by human hands as if he needed anything because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. The truth of the matter is we're not autonomous.

We need him. Every breath we breathe is by his sanction. Jesus insists that not a sparrow falls from the heaven because of his sanction.

Every hair on my head is counted and that's a rapidly diminishing number and he keeps it all sorted out. Every breath we breathe, every bit of food we take, finally, directly or indirectly comes from him. We're dependent upon him.

Entirely. Utterly. And any other view of God makes God too small, too beggarly, too myopic, too impotent.

Then he turns from this general framework, a general worldview, to anthropology, to who human beings are. From one man he made every nation of men. Not a whiff of racism there.

None. You see, one of the entailments of monotheism is that if there is but one God, then he must be the God of all, whether recognized by all or not. In other words, one of the entailments of monotheism is mission.

If there is but one God, then he is the God of all, whether he is recognized as such or not. And from one man he made the entire human race, and then he determined that they should inhabit the whole earth, and he determined the time set for them and the exact places where they should live. Yes, God graciously called out a people for himself, the Jews, during Old Testament covenantal times, although on occasion his mercy extended beyond that in the preaching of Jonah and in Nineveh and elsewhere, but at the end of the day all of those things were means to this glorious end in the words of Jesus that the good news that the gospel should be preached to every creature under the heavens from every tongue and tribe and people and nation.

He draws together a people for himself today. Now, why did God arrange things this way? Now, for the first time, you get to be introduced to the assumption that something's gone wrong. You see, so far there's been no mention of sin.

There's been no mention of what's gone wrong. But now it is presupposed that these people don't know God as they ought. God did this, verse 27, so that men would seek him.

Ah, you mean they don't already know him? No. So that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. Now, he will come back to that sin question in a moment.

He's introduced it, and he's going to come back to it, but now he also drops in something about the imminence of God, not the imminence, the immanence. That is, God is not only transcendent, above space and time, he's also immanent. That is, he is everywhere.

You can't escape him. That's what the psalmist says, isn't it? Where shall I flee from your spirit? Though I fly on the wings of the morning, that means on the rays of the sun as they break through the clouds. They're often called wings in Hebrew thought.

Though I fly away on the wings of the dawn, yet I can't escape from you. If I descend to the abyss of Shaol, I can't escape from you. Where shall I flee from this God? God is everywhere.

You can't escape him. There is a sense in which he's very close to you all the time, even when you don't know him. Please turn to side B now.

So God is transcendent. God is imminent. And in fact, he says, some of your own pagan poets have understood this point.

In him we live and move and have our being. It's not as if God is the deist God, so that he created the whole thing and then left it tick on like a watch that somebody's abandoned. No, it's not like that at all.

This God not only kicks off the whole thing, but sovereignly so controls the whole thing and is sovereignly so present everywhere that you can never ever escape his presence. Not once. Not once.

Not ever. Thus, Paul has ruled out pantheism. Paul has ruled out deism.

And now you're left with this personal transcendent God who is also imminent. And he says, some of your own poets have understood this. They say, we are his offspring.

In other words, Paul is quite capable of quoting some of the pagan literature of the day. He doesn't just have to quote the Bible to preach. He can quote minor poets like Epimenides.

Now, of course, when Epimenides said this, we are his offspring, clearly, he meant it in a pantheistic sense. But Paul has already ruled out pantheism. He's taking the words and putting them in another sense.

He's saying, in effect, Epimenides and people like him were right in a sense. They didn't have it pictured the right way. But there is a sense in which there is sometimes some insight from pagan thought or from thought that is essentially alien in some respects to Christianity.

There is some truth in all religions somewhere. Nobody gets all the lies right. Nobody's completely wrong.

So make the connections where people have some genuine insight, do you see? So if you're dealing with a Muslim down the street, it is very important to emphasize that Muslims have the sovereignty of God right. They really do. Now, there are some other things you want to say about Muslim thought, but they have that point right.

Of course, in their case, it can drift toward fatalism, and it doesn't have the notions of grace connected with Biblical Christianity. There is no Trinitarianism in the thought, but the fact that God is sovereign is surely right. He's not a domesticated god, do you see? So make the connection.

Now Paul comes more closely than to the heart of the problem. Sin, sin, sin. Therefore, since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image made by man's design or skill.

Now he's dealing with a whole massive structure of idolatry. Can you imagine what he said here? He would have said exactly the same kinds of things that Isaiah says in chapters 40 and following, the kinds of things that he himself says in chapters 1 and 2 of Romans. And then he introduces a philosophy of history.

Most Greeks thought of history going round and round and round and round in circles. But you can't make sense of the Bible unless you see that there's a linear progression. Creation and fall and the coming of Jesus and final judgment, that's what he deals with next.

In the past, God overlooked such ignorance. But now, there's something new that's taken place. Now, now, in some new events that have taken place about which I'm about to tell you, now he commands all people everywhere to repent for he has set a day in the future when we're filled with justice.

Do you see? Now you've got notions of a final judgment. And all of the implications bound up with a final judgment from the same sovereign God who made us in the first place and to whom we are therefore accountable. And he has given public witness in the historical arena that he is going to do this.

How? Because he's appointed a judge over us. A judge. And he has testified that this is the judge who will judge us by one immutable historical fact to which we bear witness.

He raised him from the dead. And now you have the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now do you see the point of all of this? This is the framework Paul adapts.

Paul lays out this entire framework before he ever mentions Jesus. Do you see that? And he does so because if you mention Jesus before this point to this lot with their biases and presuppositions and worldviews they would fit Jesus into the wrong place. It would not make sense.

Paul understands you've got to establish the framework in which Jesus fits or else the whole account of Jesus just doesn't make any sense. Now that is what I have been dealing with really in the last three talks before this one. So if this point seems a little obscure to you go back to those tapes.

That's the whole point. You must establish the worldview, the framework to talk about the gospel of Jesus Christ more narrowly. And that brings me to my last point and it's very brief.

There is, then, finally a non-negotiable gospel. Paul now introduces the resurrection. And we know from earlier in the chapter where Paul would have gone to the whole gospel itself and Jesus' death.

But he brings up the resurrection. Now Paul is not stupid. Paul doubtless sins as we do.

But he's not a stupid man. He knows that most of his hearers presuppose that spirit is good and matter is bad. They presuppose that.

Not all Greek thought did that but an awful lot of it did. Spirit is good, matter is bad. Therefore it was very easy for Greeks to believe in immortality but almost impossible for them to believe in resurrection.

Immortality, that's good because that's just a spirit going on unendingly in life everlasting. That's good. That's in the realm of spirit.

But to have somebody come back from the dead in a resurrection body, that's almost a contradiction in terms because matter is bad. That thing, you get into the good realm and then come back into the realm of the bad. It's an oxymoron like fried ice cubes.

You can't have that sort of thing. It's a contradiction in terms. And it would have been ever so easy for Paul to flinch at this point because Christians also believe in immortality, don't we? We believe in immortality.

We also believe in resurrection but we believe in immortality. So why not duck the hard point so we don't cause any offense? Deal with a common ground. Wouldn't that be good? So why doesn't he just say and so he has appointed a judge over us by the name of Jesus who has immortality and life.

Would have been a lot less offensive. He wouldn't have got cut off at the pass. This is when some people start sneering.

Up till now they're still with him. And now they're saying oh come on Paul, that really is over the top. Come on, give me a break.

But Paul understands that the gospel of Jesus Christ has some non-negotiables. That is some elements without which the gospel is no longer the gospel. And if you try to present the gospel in such a comfortable, cutesy way that you cause no umbrage at all, you have almost always sacrificed the gospel.

And somehow what you're presenting is not Jesus in the gospel anymore, it's some domesticated, powerless version of it. When people get converted, not least from an alien worldview, there's some big bites to swallow. And one of them is the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Another is the fact that Jesus died in our place to pay our sin. That we cannot work our way to God. That's a big bite for many people, for many cultures and many backgrounds.

But you can't duck it. Or you don't have the gospel at all. Now come to this last verse.

I was telling in an earlier talk in the Sunday school hour that nowadays in university missions and the like, which is where I tend to do more of my evangelism, nowadays the biblical illiteracy, the ignorance is so profound that you often get people who don't become Christians at the meetings but then sort of sign on for a further series of studies and talks and inductive Bible studies until they see enough of the big picture that eventually they become Christians. So that if in a university mission that I preach at, X people get converted, it's like 3X or 4X or 5X or 6X that then get converted over the next few weeks or months. That is just typical for university evangelism nowadays.

That, I'm suggesting, is what Paul faces here. It's not, you see, that they became followers of Paul and believed. As if that is one thing.

They immediately found out what was going on. They had already got enough of the Gospel and they believed. Rather, they have become hooked by this God, by this Jesus that Paul has presented so far, and they become followers of Paul.

They become disciples of Paul. And by becoming disciples of Paul, in consequence, they learn more and more of the Gospel and in due course, believe. So in my university missions, what happens is, a significant number of people become, in effect, disciples of Don.

They become followers of Don. And later they believe. That's the way it is.

And so in your evangelism, especially when you're dealing with people from this biblically illiterate world all around you in Metro Toronto, what you discover is that people get hooked on this Jesus. They hear about this God and they become followers of this church, or followers of Barry Dilgood, or followers of you in your Bible study. Not in the sense that they're worshipping you, or that they think you're infallible.

But they become learners. They become disciples. And in due course, they hear the whole structure of the Gospel.

God moves in their hearts by His Spirit, and they believe. That's what's going on here. Paul understands it.

Luke records it for our learning and emulation when we preach the Gospel to the biblical illiterates in Metro Toronto. Let us pray. Enlarge our vision, we pray.

Grant us that wonderful mix of gentle compassion and empathy on the one hand, and holy boldness and forthrightness on the other with which the Apostle is so greatly endowed. Grant to us the unction of the Spirit of God, the anointing of the Spirit of God that makes this word of truth powerful in our lives and minds, in our living, and on our lips. And grant, Lord God, to us the knowledge, the faithfulness, the courage, the repentance, the obedience to enable us to be faithful witnesses in our generation.

And, O Lord God, we do earnestly beseech you that as you are bringing many, many, many people to your dear Son all around the world while remembering others, we beg of you, do not pass us by. But grant that the church should be mightily enlarged by powerful conversion in this day and age, silencing all the skeptics and the pundits. Grant that the name of Jesus may so be lifted up in the church and in our witness, in our living and in our speaking that men and women will again be drawn to Him.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/16/SID16891.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/da-carson/postmodern-times-apostolic-evangelism/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net