

careful not to alter the truth while being faithful to my vision.

The meeting of Peter and Cornelius is extremely significant since God had prepared both of these men. We must always remember that God is the prime mover in the work of evangelism, much more than we are. If we believe that he has given us a message, then we also believe that he will give us people who need to hear that message. God will arrange a time and place for us to meet those who need salvation. Frequently we are too occupied with the organization of places to meet, and the gathering of people, and too little concerned about studying God's proclamation and the content of the message we need to share.

People are interested in hearing what God has revealed to us. The proclamation is given to us in the Bible. We don't need others! It is perfect and complete! We need only to understand it and share it with others.

The most wonderful words a minister of the Gospel can hear are those which Peter heard when Cornelius told him, "... therefore we are all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God" (v. 33).

And Peter did not hesitate to give a complete account of Jesus Christ, the one about whom we need to speak. He presented the heart of the Gospel in a very brief interval and in just a few sentences, but sufficient that a man who had been prepared by God could understand and accept it. How many times have our sermons concentrated on everything except Jesus, and then we are surprised at the lack of results!

The Good News for Cornelius and his house was this: salvation is possible through Jesus Christ (v. 36). This should be the content of our Good News.

Peter thus described Christ as the Lord of all. He was a historical personage and the fulfillment of prophecy. He was the God-man, of supernatural capabilities. Peter witnessed to this, because he saw and experienced it all.

Christ, the one about whom he spoke, died on the Cross and rose again — this is basic to the message — and revealed himself to his chosen ones.

Subsequently Christ commanded them to announce this to *the people* (this is what Peter says), however, Christ said in Matt. 28:19, "to all peoples in the world." Due to the prejudices of Jewish customs and orthodox Judaism, God had to intervene in a special way to change Peter and compel him to speak to a pagan. The result was forthcoming.

This account can serve as an example for us in our work, but we dare not anticipate God's repeating in detail every move he made with Peter. The lesson is clear. We must preach the Good News to everyone, without regard to racial, cultural, and national differences, not only to those we find pleasant and likeable, and those who are wealthy and influential because they can be more useful to us in our work, but to everyone. We dare not limit God's message and the Gospel, for then we will make the same mistake as Peter did. Then God had to intervene. Let us never say to God, "Not so, Lord," for he can punish us.

May we let God do the organizing and let us remain faithful to the message which is revealed to us!

GOD AT WORK THROUGH MEN: PAUL AND THE GREEK PHILOSOPHERS (ACTS 17:22-34)

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Easter set the earliest believers on a path of effective communication. Easter released them from being frozen around non-living issues of the past to life-giving relationships because of, and around, the risen Jesus. Paul was among these effective communicators.

In the 15th and 16th chapters of the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit reveals some cardinal principles in the ways in which he leads Paul to become this effective communicator. The believer *lives by faith*. And the leading of the Holy Spirit in the total mechanics of communicating the resurrection of Jesus Christ may not be *explicit*. In fact, if "science is proof without certainty," then, "faith is certainty without proof." God leads as Paul follows his nudgings and the thoughts that he had dropped. In Acts 15:36-41 we read about the *Jerusalem Conference* with the issue of the Gentile Christians and the law. Paul along with Barnabas decides to revisit the churches to tell them about the decisions of the council. They violently disagree over John Mark (vs. 39). These saints of the early church do not seem to have any special guidance up to this point. Paul takes Silas and Timothy and moves out. This *move of faith* is then honored and clarified by a series of doors being closed while others are opened.

In Acts 16:4-9 there is trouble over the itinerary. The Holy Spirit shuts doors and prevents them from the wrong entry. In their *move of faith* they were not afraid of action or closed doors. They sought God more earnestly rather than stop. "How" the Holy Spirit gave his guidance is not as important as that he did guide. God gave the Macedonian call to the servants who had proved their submissiveness to him by accepting his course corrections while in the act of obedience. He could trust only such with the *vision of the lost*. While Paul refused to be either afraid or to sit inactive beside a closed door, he was used by the Holy Spirit to fulfill the *goal that God had for him to fulfill*. Since full knowledge of what lies ahead may cause us to be "afraid," God does not give all the details right at the beginning.

In Acts 16:9-15 the action begins. Now there is a team. Luke has joined them. While visiting the established churches they watch the genesis of new churches. They find a home to live in and a congregation to preach to while there are those who are being saved! In Acts 16:16-24 the whole picture changes. But in verses 25-34, Paul and Silas come into victory instead of despair. And quickly after the jailer and his family are baptized God removes his servants from Philippi through Thessalonica and Berea to Athens. And by this time Paul has understood the plan of God in terms of the compulsion to communicate the truth of the resurrection effectively, followed by the inevitable stirring up of trouble as well as the conversion of some.

To Mars Hill (vs. 16-21) While waiting for his teammates to arrive, Paul does not wait to be told about the need for the message of the resurrection to be told in Athens. The Resurrected One was Paul's absolute now. And all other absolutes of life that regulated his life prior to the Damascus road experience were now only relative absolutes to this "Absolute-Absolute!" This risen Jesus kept him from becoming frozen around any personal hang-ups that would prevent him from being alive to the crying needs of his environment by casting his soul on ice. So Paul obeyed this inner prompting in terms of the external need.

Paul used the (vs. 17) already structured situation (synagogue) as well as the unorthodox situation (public square) to fulfill God's purposes through making effective contact with the people of Athens. Thus, to the one who moved by faith in response to his inner awareness as well as the sensitivity of the external needs, the opportunity was given. Paul made contact with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (vs. 18). Paul's personal qualifications won him a place among the intellectuals. Paul's knowledge of the risen Jesus as his absolute among absolutes — his "new place to stand" — gave him the "message" that he was to give. Paul's knowledge of the Holy Spirit's guidance in fulfilling this "mission" made him the "messenger" with the sense of purpose and urgency.

The philosophers were interested in what Paul had to say. The phrase that they used to describe him and the situation indicates "this new teaching which you present" (vs. 19). But Paul had preached "Jesus and the resurrection" (vs. 18). This was much more than words and phrases. This was event with content. The philosophers wanted to "know" this "new teaching" and to "know . . . what these things mean." Could it be that the Holy Spirit had already drawn their initial interest to come to focus upon Paul's message?

Luke says that Athenians and the foreigners who wanted to be "like the Athenians spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new" (vs. 21). Life's frustrations force men to intellectual speculations. But if life does not extend beyond "telling and hearing something new" — never into creative and redemptive action — would it not be falling short of its ultimate possibilities? So Paul was brought to the Areopagus not to defend himself but to explain his philosophy.

At Mars Hill (vs. 22-31) Basing his cue on the words of the prophet as found in Zech. 9:13, "Thy sons, O Zion, against thy sons, O Greece," J.S. Stewart calls this moment a moment of prophetic fulfillment. The words of the apostle in vs. 22 concerning the interests of the Athenians in religion are not to be taken as complimentary in intention. Such compliments were not only condemned in the Areopagus, but this was not the intended meaning of the words of the apostle. According to F.F. Bruce, "What was piety to the Greeks was superstition in the eyes of the apostle." He then proceeds to instruct them on the basis of their ignorance (vs. 23). To Paul, meaning for existence now depended upon the personal knowledge of Jesus Christ as the Risen Lord. If men lacked this knowledge of the Absolute-Absolute, then Paul found it necessary to "set (him) forth unto (them)."

In the passage covered within vs. 24-30, Paul sets forth the God of biblical revelation. The philosophical distinctions are ignored and "proc-

lamation" takes place. Since God made everything he is the Lord of all and hence cannot be limited to man-made temples (vs. 24). It is not God who is dependent upon man for his needs, for he has no needs. But he supplies all of the needs of all creatures — including man. How necessary this proclamation seems to be in the midst of the "modern culture" wherein the secularistic views create the craving within man for the transcendent God whom they have sought to exclude (vs. 25)! This God has already determined the boundaries within which man will function. God controls human history. God has also determined limits within which man can be "man" by forming him out of the materials that he had spoken into existence and "breathing" into him his breath of life. Thus, man retains his humanity by being submissive to God and realizing that he is not just animal, but made to have "dominion" over all other creatures. In all this God's purpose is that man "might feel after him and find him" (vs. 27).

In vs. 28, Paul illustrates by quoting from Greek poets. This is very effective in communicating the truth of Revelation to an audience that is well versed in their own pre-Christian heritage. Even in India the concept of the "Prajapathi" suffering for the sins of the "praja" is a readily understood concept among those who are the intellectuals within the non-Christian communities. "That man is merely the material is always a philosophical possibility, is it not? Have not your own poets sung about this?" — this was Paul's thrust. Then, according to Paul's line of thought, it will not be proper to reduce such a God to images. He could have based his argument about the passage in Isa. 44:9 ff. God might have overlooked these acts of ignorance in times past. But now he is calling for "repentance" and as a fruit of repentance to worship him alone (vs. 30). God cannot overlook man's idolatrous actions any longer because he has made himself plainly known through a man. He has spoken in words and deeds that man can understand through this man. He has set up a day for judgment when he will judge the whole world by this man. Hence it is mandatory that every man obey this man. God made his appointment of this man known to all by "bringing him back to life again" after he had died (vs. 31). Paul is referring to John 5:27 and the thought of a fixed day of final judgment is from the biblical Revelation.

In the entire presentation Paul does not stop with mere words and statements. He moves into the importance of "events" — when these are "events" that are attested to by God himself then they judge us and our actions. In Jesus Christ, God has broken into human history. Thus by our responses to Jesus Christ we are judged.

Now the congregation at Mars Hill comes alive!

After Mars Hill. For the three verses that follow this is not an apt title. Verse 32 still indicates the same geographical location. But the passage now speaks about the response to the Mars Hill proclamation. As long as Paul spoke about a "philosophy of life" or "another option among many others" they were willing to hear and even enjoy. But Jesus Christ the person demanded action in the form of commitment. Incarnation, resurrection, judgment, the close of history as predetermined event, demand more than aesthetic enjoyment. They demand obedience in faith.

"When they heard Paul speak of the resurrection of a person who had been dead, some laughed" (vs. 32). This is not an unknown reaction. It

still sounds clearly modern. The demand of faith seems to mock the basic premise of the pride of man's reasoning capacity. And still they who declare this have to say, "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you" (I John 1:1-4).

"But others said, 'We want to hear more about this later'" — so there were others! And there still are "others." We can never treat them as merely people who want to avoid the issue of commitment and faith. They wanted to hear again because they were eager that this message should be true. To them there were no other options worthwhile. They had not found the answers in them. It is this thinking group that we encounter as a fruitful possibility in modern times. They are inquisitive. They refuse to be made to conform to the popular patterns of thoughts around them. Could this be the effect of the "God-shaped vacuum in man"? Could these who refuse to be conformed to a pattern of thinking, be the "true" intellectuals? How often one meets these in ancient cultures that have resisted the Christian faith until recent times, when, due to irresistible desire to look beyond what they have known they are willing to look even at Jesus Christ! Could there be a fear of the unanswered questions about the future? Jesus Christ himself never turned away from the honest "doubter" and the real "quester."

"But a few joined him and became believers" (vs. 34). And there are always these few. For them the quest has ended. Perhaps the Holy Spirit will use these "new creation(s)" to mock the mockers! Perhaps when man has calculated in terms of numbers God had accomplished his goal! After all, did he not lead Paul and Silas to the prison to gather to himself the family of a jailer? Praise be to his Name!!

GOD AT WORK IN CIRCUMSTANCES: PERSONAL MEETINGS (ACTS 8:26-40)

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This passage tells us about a meeting between two persons. The encounter would have been impossible had not God intervened to reduce the gap existing between the two people in question.

The first person was the minister of the Queen of Ethiopia. He came from a far country and seemed to have been traveling alone. He was not a Jew, but a Gentile. He was, meanwhile, a eunuch; and (according to Ex. 29:33, Lev. 26:20, Lev. 22:10-16, and Deut. 23:1) he was not allowed to have anything to do with the God of Israel. He could not offer actual worship as he was not able to come near any altar nor present any offering. And yet he was a pious man and was even reading the Old Testament in the Septuagint (LXX) translation, understood by the learned people of his time.

The second person was Philip, a Jew of good reputation, full of the Spirit of God and wisdom. He was chosen to serve in material things (to feed the widows and look after them). But God sent him to Samaria, and his ministry started a real revival among the people — where, in the midst of his great work, sinners were saved in great numbers, a multitude of sick people were healed, and where many Jews possessed by demons were delivered. And so there was much joy in that city (Acts 8:5-8).

In the middle of this great success and rewarding revival, the angel of the Lord said to Philip (v. 26): "Rise and go toward the *south* . . . to Gaza. This is a *desert* road . . ." The original text says: "This is a desert," probably referring to Gaza itself also. Philip obeyed, putting aside immediately all his plans and the revival in which he was ministering. He changed his direction from northbound to southbound, from a fertile and densely populated country to a desert and lonely area. He followed the guidance of the Lord.

No wonder that God was, under these conditions, able to plan such an encounter to take place between Philip and this "very important official" and to make this encounter bring forth eternal fruit. The high position of this official should have prevented him from having anything to do with a modest man such as Philip. On the other hand, it would have been very normal also for Philip, as a Jew, to shrink from having anything to do with a stranger — especially when he discovered that he was a eunuch (as this was considered taboo by the religious people of his time).

The tool of the contact in this important encounter was the Scripture from which Philip built up his conversation that led his newly-met friend to accept Christ as his personal Savior and to be baptized in his Name.

Do things happen in this same way today? In similar situations, the results should always be similar . . . where the Lord's servant is guided by him; when he is ready to change his plans in order to obey his Lord's