

Acts 17:16-34 Athens and Africa

What question comes into your mind when you peek in on some of what is happening to Paul on his missionary exploits?

Taking a snippet from when he arrives in Philippi; there is the conversion of Lydia followed by Paul casting a demon out of our young girl who *brought her owners much gain by fortune telling (16:16)* resulting in...

Acts 16:19 But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. ...:22 The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. 23 And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely.

From Philippi they travel to Thessalonica and more **gospel ministry**. Again massive resistance is evident.

Acts 17:5 But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd.

For the sake of Paul and Silas' safety they get them **out of town** as quick as possible and send them off to Berea.

Paul immediately gets stuck into **gospel ministry**. There is some positive response with many of them believing (v11), and once again some Jews from Thessalonica came to Berea ...v13b *agitating and stirring up the crowds.*

Once again in the face of dangerous opposition Paul is moved on to Athens. After all he has been through **I would expect him** to at least take a couple days off in seclusion and safety.

But he doesn't take a break. He gets stuck into **gospel ministry**.

Acts 17:16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him....

With all that has happened to him in Philippi and Thessalonica and Berea... the question that comes into my mind:

Is this guy **a sucker** for punishment?

I only ever played **one official rugby game** in my life. It was a game between the Baptist College students and the Afrikaanse Baptiste Seminarium. Needless to say I was battered...

But **I learned my lesson**. I am not a sucker for punishment. I never accepted an invitation to play in the rugby team again.

Is Paul stupid? **Is he a sucker** for punishment?

Or is there something else going on that keeps him plugging away at this **gospel ministry** in spite of repeated and expected and dangerous resistance and persecution?

What is it that moves Paul to be so persistent **in gospel ministry**? Why is he willing to risk his life again and again for people he doesn't know? Why does he keep getting up from being battered only to be battered again?

1 Why keep on with Gospel ministry?

The encounter Paul has with the people in Athens helps us to see why he does what he does; seeing that there are some **crucial convictions** that keep moving him on in gospel ministry even in the face of danger.

Anyone who holds to these convictions **can do no other** than keep on with gospel ministry even when the world is against them.

1.1 The presence of false religion

Having arrived in Athens having **run a gauntlet** of persecution to get there...

Acts 17:16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

Paul saw the **spiritual confusion** of the Athenians. *Every gateway and porch carried its protecting god. Every street, every square, nay, every purlieu, had its sanctuaries, and a Roman poet bitterly remarked that it was easier in Athens to find gods than men" (G. S. Davies)*

The sight of the city full of idols hit him square in the eyes; leaving him feeling grieved and distressed and agitated.

The context of city full of people who have given themselves to **the lie** of false religion and flawed philosophy weighs heavy on Paul's heart.

He knows that God created men and women **to be worshippers**. But that God commands that He and He alone be the object of our devotion and worship.

Any other god or idol or object of devotion is nothing more than **a mirage**; appearing to promise so much, but is only a delusion – a deception - giving people a false sense of purpose and security.

He has **a deep seated conviction** that there is only one true God... *Acts 17:24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.*

In that one sentence we see that **this one true living God** is Creator, Sovereign, everywhere present, self-sufficient and the source of every good gift.

This true and living God warned of the lie of idolatry through **Isaiah the prophet** ...
Isaiah 41:29 Behold, they (idols) are all a delusion; their works are nothing; their metal images are empty wind.

Are you convinced like Paul that there is only one true God? If you are that means that your Muslim or JW or Mormon or Jewish or Hindu or Universalist or nominal Christian... neighbour or colleague or relative is deceived by false religion.

1.2 The prospects of false religion

Paul had a **deep seated conviction** that the prospects for those who are deceived by false religion have a unavoidable destiny.

Acts 17:30 ... but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.

He was convinced that **God will judge** every single person. Each one will be measured according to the standard of God's perfect holiness.

Jesus warned people of coming judgment *Matthew 13:49 So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous*

There will be **two groups** of people with different prospects...

2 Thessalonians 1:7 ...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels 8 in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might...

Are you convinced about **judgement by God of all men**? Are you convinced that you and your spouse and children and neighbour and colleague and every man and women all over the world down through the ages will stand before God and face judgment?

Are you convinced about the **condemnation** away from the presence of God of those who are not accepted by God? Are you convinced about heaven and hell as real destinations beyond this life?

1.3 The provision for false religion

It is not enough to point out to someone that they are being deceived or are in trouble with God; **it is necessary** to give them the solution to their dilemma.

It is true that all of humanity **cannot avoid God's judgment** (*v31*) carried out by Jesus.

Notice how **the content** of Paul's message is summarized... *Acts 17:18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbling wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"--because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.*

Paul points to Jesus. Jesus is not dead. He is alive and well, seated at the right hand of the Father with responsibility to judge you and the rest of humanity.

But there is more in this reference to the resurrection of Jesus. It is the decisive event in history pointing to **the rescuing provision** secured by God for sinners.

1 Corinthians 15:3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,

There was no doubt in Paul's mind that redemption from sin has been accomplished by Jesus. It was his **deep seated conviction** that God has secured forgiveness for repentant sinners; *v30 ...now He commands all people everywhere to repent (from false religion and any lesser thing)...*

Are you convinced that God has made provision for the worst of repentant sinners (liars, adulterers, blasphemers, thieves, murderers and rapists and sexually perverted...) by sending Jesus as an atoning sacrifice; raising Him from the dead?

Are you convinced that when people are convicted of their sin and they call out not knowing what to do to be saved; that they need to hear what Peter told the crowds on the day of Pentecost?

Acts 2:38 And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Are you convinced of *John 3:18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*

2 What has Athens got to do with Africa?

Since today is **Africa Day** shouldn't we be thinking about the people of Africa and the need for gospel ministry?

We live on one of the most beautiful **continents in the world**. Our weather patterns are great; we have spectacular natural beauty along with a variety of people groups spread all over the continent.

We are told that the majority of **Africans** are adherents of Christianity or Islam. It was also estimated that Christians form 45% of **Africa's** population, with Muslims forming 40.6%.

But it is also reported that Africans **often combine** the practice of their traditional beliefs with the practice of Abrahamic religions. When syncretism is prevalent in Christian circles it makes it a false religion.

Conrad Mbewe, respected pastor and theologian from Zambia is outspoken on this subject...

“Many explanations have been given for the explosion of the charismatic movement in Africa. Many have seen this as a powerful visitation of the Holy Spirit. Whereas there is probably more than one reason, I want to add my own observation to this for what it is worth.

In this article, I am not referring to the old conservative form of Pentecostalism once represented by the Assemblies of God churches. I have in mind the current extreme form that is mushrooming literally under every shrub and tree in Africa.

How can one explain this phenomenon? I think that one reason why the charismatic movement in Africa has been like a wild bushfire is because it has not challenged the African religious worldview but has instead adopted it. It has simply baptised it with Bible verses and Christian words that previously meant something totally different...

In the African charismatic circles, the ‘man of God’ has replaced the witch-doctor. He is the one who oozes with mysterious power that enables him to break through those two impregnable layers (ancestors and spirits), which us lesser mortals cannot penetrate. So, when blessings are not flowing our way despite our prayers, we make a beeline to his quarters or his church for help. This explains the throngs in these circles. The crowds are not looking for someone to explain to them the way to find pardon with God. No! They want the ‘man of God’ to pray for them. This also explains the stranglehold that ‘men of God’ have on the minds of their devotees in these circles. In the evangelicalism of a former generation ‘men of God’ were primarily preachers of the word of God, but in the new setup they are primarily priests who enter the inner sanctuaries to bring down blessings to us.”

Traditional religion is **not unique to Africa** and its peoples. Some kind of traditional false religious belief has been a present reality across the world down through the ages.

Zoroastrianism was popular in Persia; Gnosticism was part of the Greco-Roman belief system. People in Germany believed in Elves and the Celtic people held Druids in high regard.

In Europe today cultural or state religion is present but more and more people claim to have no religion; preferring to describe themselves as secular or agnostic or atheistic.

What is **your response** to the religious landscape in Africa and the rest of the world?

- Some believe that it is unkind **to disturb or to interfere** with another person’s religious belief and practice.

It is their view that **any effort to proselytize** is tantamount to attitudes of discrimination on the one hand and superiority on the other hand; leading to an impoverishment of rich cultural and religious heritage.

- Others maintain that people should **be left alone** as it should be their free choice to explore and decide for themselves what they prefer to believe and practice.
- Many men and women in our society have adopted the position that all religious expression **is valid**; believing that "*all roads lead to Rome*"; all religions worship God and ultimately will find favour with Divine Reality.
- And then there are people who believe all religion is merely **a primitive expression** that people have as a result of fear and a lack of understanding about life. Given enough time and education and development religion will fade into obscurity.

One could argue for any of the above responses **was it not for** these fundamental convictions made known during the Apostle Paul's visit to Athens.

The presence of false religion
The prospect of false religion
The provision for false religion