

The Gospel Goes to Mars
By the Rt. Rev. Ray R. Sutton

It's a different world, different time and different Church in the west now. It has the feel as though the Church is even living on a different planet, say Mars. I was reminded of the strangeness of our world by the following report of actual telephone conversations:

Samsung Electronics:

Caller: "Can you give me the telephone number for Jack?"

Operator: "I'm sorry, sir, I don't understand who you are talking about".

Caller: "On page 1, section 5, of the user guide it clearly states that I need to unplug the fax machine from the AC wall socket and telephone Jack before cleaning. Now, can you give me the number for Jack?". Operator: "I think you mean the telephone point on the wall".

Then there was the caller who asked for a knitwear company in Woven.

Operator: "Woven?. Are you sure?"

Caller: "Yes. That's what it says on the label - Woven in Scotland".

On another occasion, a man making heavy breathing sounds from a phone box told a worried operator: "I haven't got a pen, so I'm steaming up the window to write the number on".

Computer Capers:

Tech Support: "I need you to right-click on the Open Desktop".

Customer: "OK".

Tech Support: "Did you get a pop-up menu?"

Customer: "No".

Tech Support: "OK. Right-Click again. Do you see a pop-up menu?"

Customer: "No".

Tech Support: "OK, sir. Can you tell me what you have done up until this point?"

Customer: "Sure. You told me to write 'click' and I wrote 'click'".

Tech Support: "OK. In the bottom left hand side of the screen, can you see the 'Start' button displayed?" Customer: "Wow. How can you see my screen from there?"

British Rail:

Customer: "How much does it cost to Bath on the train?"

Operator: "If you can get your feet in the sink, then it's free".

Contemporary humanity in the west really does have the feel of another planet, say Mars. Our world no longer speaks the language of the Church; they certainly don't seem sympathetic to the Church. And yet Jesus Christ calls us in His Great Commission to take the Gospel to this Mars like world. I've often thought that we've got to assume we're on another planet with other creatures to begin to figure out how to spread the Gospel, because we can no longer assume anything; it seems like we know nothing. I don't know if you've felt this way, but when I listen to Christians trying to represent biblical and

historic Christianity, they talk like their living on Mars with the Martians trying to figure out how to reach them. And they sound like, even say at times, “We’ve never been in this situation before; we’ve never been to Mars or had to try to reach the Martians . . . our neighbors.” Maybe your family and neighborhood do look like the bar scene in Star Wars.

Even if your surrounding world looks and sounds like Mars, the Good News we find in the New Testament is that the Gospel has gone to Mars before. Only it’s not the Mars of another planet. It is the Mars of Mars Hill in ancient Athens. If we turn to the Holy Scriptures, we discover that Christianity faced this clash with other cultures, especially Western, pagan Greco/Roman culture early on. In the 17th chapter of Acts, we find a brief description of the Gospel going to Mars . . . Mars Hill that is. I should like to read the passage first (RSV), then briefly expounds it and finally make some application to the evangelical effort confronting us in our own day and time. Verse sixteen begins,

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. 17 So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the market place every day with those who chanced to be there. 18 Some also of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers met him. And some said, “What would this babblers say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities” – because he preached Jesus and the resurrection. 19 And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is which you present? 20 For you bring some strange things to our ears; we wish to know therefore what these things mean.” 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

22 So Paul, standing in the middle of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. 26 And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and boundaries of their habitation, 27 that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, 28 for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ 29 Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man. 30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men 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, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead.”

32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." 33 So Paul went out from among them. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them (Acts 17:16-34).

Acts 17 in the Larger Context of the Book Acts

Our passage falls in the context of the larger drama in Acts. You may remember Acts begins with the enthronement of Christ as King, the Ascension. Once the king takes His seat, His kingly rule begins. The first thing to happen under the rule of Christ over the world is the reversal of the Tower of Babel at Pentecost. An international gathering of Jews occurred every fifty days after Passover; the feast was called Pentecost. It was on this occasion that God poured out His Spirit in the form of cloven tongues of fire. His empowerment from on high enabled the Apostles to speak in tongues. They communicated the Gospel, the Good News of Christ's Death and Resurrection, in the native tongues of all of the Jews present. This is quite significant. For the first time since the ancient tower of Babel, the Gentile world heard the revelation of God in its own native tongues. At the first Tower of Babel, the world was unified. It was not divided into nations and ethnic groupings. But the world decided to build a giant tower to get to God. There was nothing wrong with going to God. God was already with them revealing Himself through His faithful people, the descendants of Noah.

The blunder of Babel was to raise a temple in the form of a human battlement, a tower of military and sexual proportions according to human speculation, design and dimension. After the first temple of human power and sensuality was erected, a false liturgy was formulated. And the world ended up not worshipping God, but essentially bringing praise to humanity through this great, self-aggrandizing monument. It was a heinous offense, the height of rebellion to God. It was original sin to the tenth power.

God was outraged. Not only did He destroy the Tower. He destroyed the Tower. He also confused the language of the world into many languages, hence the designation of the tower as Tower of Babel. The supreme act of unity became a blasphemous linguistic holocaust. Yet, there was mercy in the midst of judgment. The confusion of language would impede the growth of sin. The creation of a unified, pagan empire united against God would be nearly impossible from Babel forward. The retarding of human empires was a great mercy, because human empires have been notoriously antagonistic to biblical religion. Why? The theology of the Ascension taught in the Book of Acts reveals Christ as Lord, the Divine Emperor. Because God confused the language of humanity after Babel, there were not world empires until the Babylon of several centuries prior to the birth of Christ. At that time, God revealed through a pagan emperor, Nebuchadnezzar, a hideous giant of man representing five kingdoms: Babylon, Medo Persia, Greece, Rome and a fifth kingdom in the form of a stone, a rock, that brings down the entire manikin of empire. The fifth kingdom is portrayed by Daniel as a huge stone being hurled from heaven as the kingdom of God.

We should clearly understand in terms of redemptive history what Babylon truly represented. It was a new, pagan empire convergence of the entire world under a false religion antithetical to biblical religion. Babylon therefore is the recapitulation of the Tower of Babel. But something very different takes place with the new Tower of Babel in Daniel's day. Instead of destroying Babylon, God converts the king and his kingdom. He does so by revealing Himself in revelation in the native Gentile tongue of that day. And he raises up Daniel to interpret. This entire scene and process anticipates the ultimate reversal of Babel/Babylon at Pentecost over half a millennium later.

An important linguistic observation should be noted about the language of the Book of Daniel at this point. Significantly, the first chapter is written in Hebrew, the language in which most of the Old Testament is written. But at chapter 2 of Daniel, the language changes to the Gentile tongue known as Aramaic. The implication is that when the new tower of Babel, the giant empires of humanity, the revelation of God goes forth in the tongue of the Gentile with the coming of the fifth kingdom, the Kingdom of God. Pentecost was the fulfillment of Daniel's incredible interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's worst nightmare of a dream, the displacement of human perversion and power by the purity of the kingdom of Christ.

Since, Pentecost was the ultimate undoing of the Tower of Babel, the Book of Acts as a whole fulfills Daniel's interpretation of the kingdoms in Nebuchadnezzar's dream. It starts with Pentecost at which time the Gospel is first revealed to God's people in Gentile tongues. The remainder of Acts reveals the spread of the Gospel along the lines of the ancient kingdoms in the dream found in Daniel. It tells how the Gospel spread from Babel, to the Medo Persian world (Asia Minor), Greece and eventually Rome.

The first nine chapters of Acts describe the spread of the Gospel throughout Israel and Samaria, the land that had been conquered by Babylon and Assyria. Understandably, the Gospel raises Jew/Gentile tensions early on even the Church. The crisis between Jewish and Hellenistic Jewish widows prompts the Diaconate. The conversion of Samaritans creates the Simon the Magician conflict. But notice how immediately after the Gospel goes to Samaria, Paul is converted and the Apostle Peter receives revelation in the form of a dream in food imagery about the spread of the Gospel to the unclean Gentile kingdoms. Then St. Paul's missionary journeys begin, three of them for each of the remaining three kingdoms in Daniel's dream.

The Greeks saw themselves as the center of civilization and everyone else as barbarian. My theology professor (S. Lewis Johnson) had much different perspective. The Greek view didn't matter. He was from Charleston, South Carolina. He informed us that the Charlestonians saw themselves as the real center and everyone else was the real barbarian. As he looked out at the class he casually commented, "So unless you're from Charleston you're all a bunch of barbarians to me." I knew from that moment it was going to be a bit more difficult to make an A in his class! It did illustrate, which was his real point, that barbarian is a relative term. And most importantly, we are called by the Gospel to place the center of the universe, our world, in Jesus Christ.

The Greek/barbarian way of viewing the world underscores how the spread of Christianity was into different cultures. But it didn't start in a culture alien to it. If you will recall, Christianity was born in the biblical, albeit Old Testament, culture of Jerusalem and Israel. Eventually the missionary journeys of St. Paul took the Gospel of God into different cultures. One of those cultures was Greece. We know about Corinth because a Church was established there early on. But do we remember what St. Paul faced when he went to Athens. In many ways Athens was a microcosm of the entire Western world of old, but important for us, it was a cameo shot of the post-modern Western world of the present. It therefore offers a paradigm for the contemporary Mars Hill culture of today.

Exposition of Some Pertinent Details

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.

Immediately prior to his coming to Athens, St. Paul had gone to Thessalonica in Asia Minor and a place called Berea. So much conflict resulted from his preaching the Gospel in Thessalonica that he had to go on to Berea. The Bereans were quite responsive to the Gospel. Acts 17:11-12 reports, "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether these things were so. Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few." Attention is called to the fact that the Bereans searched Holy Scripture to check out Paul's teaching. Notice also how the text calls attention to the fact that the women were Greeks. Perhaps this explains why St. Paul would find himself gravitating to Greeks to take them Gospel. But he was virtually forced to do so because the Jews of Thessalonica were so antagonistic to St. Paul that they followed him to Berea and stirred up opposition. St. Paul had to leave Silas and Timothy in Berea. In the meantime, he went to Athens to wait for them.

Athens was a remarkable ancient city. "The earliest buildings of Athens date from 1200 B.C., when the Acropolis, the upper part of the city, was first fortified and used as a citadel. . . . In the 6th century BC Athens: the acropolis changed its nature from a citadel to a shrine, with a temple devoted to Athene – the goddess of wisdom who gives her name to the city – as well as many smaller shrines and temples. . . . In 490 BC Greece suffered its first attack from the Persians, who were defeated by the Athenian army at the Battle of Marathon."¹ Persia retaliated, invaded and destroyed Athens in 480 BC. "When the Athenians returned to their ruined home the following year, they began a program of rebuilding under their leader Pericles, creating the beautiful city that we associate with the golden age of Athens. . . . Athens became the leading city of Greece, not only because of its art and architecture, but also in the fields of literature and Philosophy. Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno – who founded the Stoic school – all lived and taught in the city. Many writers of the period lived in Athens, including the tragedians Euripides, Aeschylus, and Sophocles; the comic dramatist Aristophanes; and the historian Herodotus, who wrote an account of the city's wars with Persia. The city was also the

¹ Jenny Roberts, *Bible: Then and Now* (New York: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 31-32.

birthplace of democracy.”² St. Paul therefore took the Gospel to a culture almost identical to ours. The parallels are unavoidable. Just as Athens was the cultural, philosophical and ideological center of the western world, so is America.

Yet, in spite of all of the culture, the city of Athens was “wholly given to idols.” Humans are made in the image of God. They are therefore religious in their essence. They cannot escape being religious in everything they do even though they deny religion. In ancient Athens, they worshipped idols. A pagan idol is an inanimate object treated as or believed to be invested with the communicable or incommunicable attributes of God.

Communicable attributes are those traits common to God and humanity such love, wisdom etc. An incommunicable attribute would facet of essence found only in God: aseity, perfection etc.

St. Paul was so moved by the extent to which the Athenians were misled by their own idolatry that according to verse 17, “he disputed . . . in the market place daily.” The verb translated dispute in the KJ and argue in the RSV means intense interaction. It is significant that St. Paul takes this approach. It is quite different from St. Peter at Pentecost. In the more biblical culture, the apostles could preach to large crowds. To Gentile, pagan cultures, the approach was more one on one and to much smaller groups.

Two groups in particular were taken by what St. Paul was teaching, the Epicureans and Stoics, two schools of thought very opposite from one another. The Epicureans lived for the moment day by day. They sought to eat, drink and live to the full. The stoics on the other hand attempted to avoid any extreme attitude or action. But both groups found agreement when it came to St. Paul’s teaching, which they totally misunderstood. Notice the text says they thought the apostle was referring to two separate deities, Jesus and the Resurrection, as indicated by the last part of verse 18: “he seemed to be a setter forth of strange gods . . . Jesus and the Resurrection.” Although brilliant, these philosophical groups were biblically and spiritually illiterate.

According to verse 19, they took St. Paul to the Areopagus, a council named for the hill of Mars. Their only question, “May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is,” and in the verse after the next, verse 21, Luke parenthetically adds, “For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.” They were taken not by veracity, truth, but novelty. We should not make the mistake of thinking that philosophy is only concerned with truth. Or that intellectual are not subject to the same crass cravings as any person, curiosity being one of the leading one.

Even so, in the case of biblical truth, St. Paul’s teaching was not new but it was novel to them. But it was not true because it was new. St. Paul’s listeners were interested in what he had to say but for the wrong reason. Interest does not always translate into conversion. This is one of the fallacies of basing evangelistic technique on what appeals or is interesting to the unbeliever.

² *Idem.*

In response to their curiosity, St. Paul stands on Mars Hill to deliver a message. The location should not go without notice. Mars was the god of war, the Greek god Ares. He was the son of Zeus and Hera. Lover of Aphrodite, he was liked much better by the Romans. As Mars he appears in shining armor and not as the whining, Greek god. Theologically, however, St. Paul stands up in a hostile environment in every sense. Most importantly, perhaps the indication is that the Apostle faces a group at war with the world, even God and the Gospel.

St. Paul begins by pointing to their extremely religious culture in verse 22. The word “superstition” does not do justice to the Greek. The words “religiously observant” convey more of the intent of the original text. His comment was one and the same time a complement and a criticism. The custom in public speaking was to start with a compliment in a talk. The Athenians were a religious people, which is good. But in verse 23 St. Paul makes an observation with a double entendre: “For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.” The history behind the practice of an altar to an unknown god is important. H. V. Morton in his book, *In the Steps of St. Paul*, relates the following, “Everyone knew the story of the plague that visited Athens in the sixth century before Christ; and how, after sacrifices had been made to every known god and plague continued, the services of . . . Epimenides, were requested. He drove a flock of black and white sheep to the Areopagus and allowed them to stray from there as they liked, waiting until they rested of their own free will: and on these spots were the sheep sacrificed ‘to the fitting god.’ The plague ceased, and it became the custom, not in Athens alone, to erect altars to unknown deities.”³

The Apostle’s criticism alluded to this historic situation. He was saying that they only god they didn’t really worship was the true God. They knew but they didn’t know Him. He was the true God who had stopped their plague but He was unknown by them.

Paul explains in the following verses. Notice the progression of thought in his presentation. First, he begins in verse 24 with the doctrine of creation: “God that made the world and all things therein, . . . dwelleth not in temples made with hands.” When the Apostles preached to a biblical culture, they most often began with Abraham. When they preached to Gentiles, they started with creation. And in particular the Apostle Paul proclaims the Creator/creature distinction. God is distinct in His being, transcendent. He cannot be contained by anything humans make, not even their religious shrines. And the fact that He is the Creator, distinct in His essence from the creation, means He is Sovereign. According to St. Paul in verse 26, God “hath determined the times before appointed.” Yet even though God is sovereign, He is not a fatalistic, impersonal God. He is at the same time in the language of verse 27 “not far from every one of us.” The biblical God is not a distant, capricious God like the Greco/Roman gods. He is so near that St. Paul quotes a contemporary poet of his day when he states, “in him we live, and move, and have our being.” Unbelievers can have knowledge. What they know is not different from what believers know. It’s just that unbelievers take what they know in the

³ Citation found in Charles Ludwig, *Cities in New Testament Times* (Denver: Accent Books, 1976), pp. 38-39.

wrong direction. They apply the personalness of God to impersonal idols. This is why Paul adds in verse 29, “Forasmuch as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man’s device.”

Then the Apostle Paul moves into a second section of his presentation when he explains in verse 30, “And the times of this ignorance, God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent.” The phrasing of St. Paul implies that something has changed such that God now has greater expectation of humanity. What happened was the Incarnation. And the Apostle simply states that God commands everyone to repent, which was a tremendous challenge to a group of people wanting to play with ideas. St. Paul moves beyond ideas to action, repentance. Philosophers spoke of conversion as a change in thinking. St. Paul speaks of it as a change of heart.

The Apostle further drives home his call to repentance in verse 31 by turning to eschatology, the third portion of his sermon. He does not speculate about the return of Christ, instead he speaks of the certainty of a day of reckoning: “He (God) appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man (Jesus) whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.” St. Paul speaks of what we call general eschatology: judgment, the Resurrection from the dead and the life eternal. For the Greco Roman world, this was a much different view of time. For them, time was cyclical. It was not linear. And if life is simply cyclical, then there is no final point of culmination. Everything returns to the way it was. But if time is linear, then there will come a moment of no return. Linear time means there can be the notion of progress, which we so take for granted. Life moves forward and on and eventually upward if the “Man” of whom the Apostle speaks is accepted.

With these words, the Apostle Paul concludes a message that is essentially the microcosm of the catholic creeds. His audience got the point. They did fine until as verse 32 specifies, “And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, ‘We will hear thee again of this matter.’” And then as St. Paul departed, “certain men clave unto him, and believed.” The response was fewer than the three thousand souls on Pentecost but for the ones who did “cleave unto Paul and believe,” their reception of belief in Christ was no less significant. It was simply not as dramatic as Pentecost or the Damascus Road experience of St. Paul himself. Thus, by way of application the following should be noted about evangelism.

Application

The first application of the Gospel going to Mars Hill points out St. Paul’s emphasis on the Sovereignty of God given the Greeks’ attention to a superstitious kind of religious practices and life in paganism. In one sense the word “superstition” is not a bad translation. One can tell from the context that these people proliferated idols for fear that they would somehow miss some deity resulting in catastrophe to them. This is

superstition. There are two aspects to this first application. For one, St. Paul made their religious superstition the point of contact in his message with the pagan worldview. We should therefore never overlook the fact that being highly cultured and intellectual has nothing to do with not being superstitious. Paganism breeds superstition. And it is a kind of slavery and bondage, the worst sort. I remember being quite superstitious as an athlete when I was a teenager. I was given a pair of golf shoes once before a youth tournament. I ended up winning the tournament. Somehow I immediately thought those golf shoes had something to do with it. I called them my magic golf shoes. And even though I didn't win every tournament in which I wore them I still somehow thought they would help me to win. Eventually of course my feet outgrew those shoes, to mad sadness. Although my friends rejoiced when I quit wearing them because they were beginning to waft a unique odor in the air. My superstition about those golf shoes is ridiculous when you think about it. But then superstition is not rationale. And that's the point; superstition involves a kind of religious faith. But paganism leads to superstition and bondage.

A second aspect of this application has to do with how the God of the message of Christianity is presented. St. Paul emphasized God's sovereignty. Why? If God is Lord and in control then the rabbits' feet of this world don't matter. It's God's plan. What He wills and wants. And thus we are called to faith in this Sovereign Lord of all things in heaven and earth and not to superstition. If we trust and obey God, then nothing else matters not the color of our socks or tie when we try to make that business deal or not the ritual of our day before we engage something important. It's God who is Lord of all. Thus, our proclamation of the Gospel of necessity involves a portrayal of Christ as Lord. It means confronting in love and kindness the pagan world around with the fact it is superstitious and offer a Sovereign God to trust. The early Church emphasized the Lordship of Christ. And missionaries carrying the Gospel to Europe often went to the source of pagan, superstition and confronted it as false. There is that marvelous story of how St. Boniface cut down a pagan, cosmic tree in front of its worshippers to show them that the god they worshipped was false and impotent. Maybe we should get out chain saws, but we should at least recognize the importance of noting and detecting superstition, and attempt to displace it with an emphasis on the God's sovereignty.

A second application of St. Paul's method and message has to do with his emphasis on a final day of reckoning, judgment. Notice that St. Paul goes right to the final end of all things, the Resurrection of the dead to point back and emphasis Christ's Resurrection. Paul's attention to final purpose to a Greek culture cut right to their nerve. Underscored that that is the point at which he got a rise from his listeners. He was not trying to be insulting. But he was going to the vital nerve of the false premises on which they based their lives. Lesslie Newbigin in his important analysis of modern and postmodern humanity, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*, describes this telic emphasis of St. Paul as the importance of final, or end purpose. Newbigin observes that the Enlightenment through the new science emphasized cause and effect to the exclusion of end purpose. Nothing wrong with the scientific method. It resulted from the seminal aspects of a revival of the Doctrine of creation at the time of the Reformation. But to exclude the final purpose of all things was a major modification of the Medieval world and life view. Newbigin points out that modern man's preoccupation with

cause/effect to the exclusion of purpose has led to an amoral science, education, economics and politics. I beg your indulgence as I quote him at some length.

Medieval thought saw divine purpose manifest everywhere in the world of nature. The revelation of that purpose had been given in those events confessed in the church's creed, and thus all study of nature had its place within the framework that the creed articulated. The condition for entry into the world of scholarship was the acceptance of that framework.

The effect of the work of the new scientists, and above all the brilliant vision of Newton, was to replace this explanatory framework with another. The real world disclosed by the work of science was one governed not by purpose but by natural laws or cause and effect. Teleology had no place physics or astronomy. All the movements of tangible bodies and the changes in the visible world could be explained without reference to purpose and in terms of efficient cause. The rotation of the planets manifested not the perfection of the divine will but the uniform operation of the laws of inertia and gravitation. As the methods of science achieved greater and greater triumphs, both theoretical and practical, the old picture of how things are, the picture derived from the Bible and vividly sketched, for example, in the medieval mystery plays, was replaced by a quite different one. The real world, as distinct from the world of appearances, was a world of material bodies – as vast as the sun or as small as the atom – moving ceaselessly according to unchanging and mathematically stable laws in a fixed and infinite space through time, which moved with unvarying velocity from an infinite past to an infinite future. All causes, therefore, are adequate to the effects they produce, and all things can be in principle adequately explained by the causes that produce them. To have discovered the cause of something is to have explained it. There is no need to invoke purpose or design as an explanation. There is no place for miracles or divine intervention in providence as categories of explanation. God may be conceived, as in eighteenth-century Deism, as the ultimate author of it all, but one does not need to know the author personally in order to read the book. Nature – the sum total of what exists – is the really real. And the [new] scientist is the priest who can unlock for us the secrets of nature and give us the practical mastery of its workings.⁴

Newbiggin's point concerns the way God's ultimate purpose and resolution of all things has been cut away from a science and worldview of cause and effect. Cause and effect cut from purpose results in a very mechanical approach to everything. In the Church it has meant that sociological analysis and not Scripture and theology has dominated evangelistic method, content and strategy. With a cause/effect mindset, it's simply what gets people coming through the doors. And since judgment is a negative subject, reminding humans of their mortality and even more that they will face a final judgment some day, judgment is hardly ever discussed. And I don't count views of the second coming as addressing judgment. They often lead to a trivial kind of sensationalism. St.

⁴ Lesslie Newbiggin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 24-25.

Paul's message to the Greeks, to his own post-modern world emphasized final purpose and resolution.

A third application of Acts 17 means the confrontation between Greco/Roman paganism and the Gospel is not new, nor is it entirely new to our culture. It happened before and the Gospel over came. It took place at the beginning of American culture. It is occurring again and the Gospel can overcome again. Failure to realize that the conflict is not novel results in arrogance in general, and approaches to evangelism oriented for a culture other than Mars Hill.

As for the problem of pride, the great arrogance of the West, and in particular America, is to view its culture and times as somehow completely unique. It makes us think we are the dawning of a new age released from the demands of previous times. It compels us to look down on other cultures as backwards because after all, the assumption is that we're so advanced and ahead of everyone else that given enough time and tutelage the rest of the world will see it our way.

This arrogant, "we have arrived with the new, fully evolved culture for everyone else attitude," has come into the Western Church. It was reflected at the last meeting of the Anglican Bishops in 1998 at Lambeth, the once every ten year event in the Anglican Communion when all of the Anglican Bishops gather at Canterbury Cathedral in England, which is the official see of the Archbishop of Canterbury, who resides at Lambeth in London, England.

You may recall that the liberal English, Canadian and American Bishops were stunned by what they encountered. They were overwhelmed and shocked by the reality that their views were the minority in the larger context of the rest of the world of Christianity, especially the two-thirds world comprising most of the globe. The point was publicly demonstrated when the apostate, liberal Bishop, John Spong, attacked the two-thirds world leaders with a racial slur describing the African Bishops as, "A bunch of leaders only recently removed by a generation or so from witchcraft and superstition." To which one of the brilliant African Bishops responded, "We may be only a generation from witchcraft but at least we're moving away from it," the implication being that the liberal views of Spong and the likes were essentially taking the Church back towards the very thing the two-thirds world had recently left. The African Bishop was right on target. The new liberal, Western theology and morality were not new. They are simply the old paganism in slightly different clothing.

The new clothing of the old paganism in one sense is nothing new. It has always been with us. American culture has always reflected two worlds, the old Greco/Roman worldview and culture and Christianity. You can see it in the architecture. It has been observed indeed that the architecture of a culture tells you much about its theology. For example, most of our state and educational buildings are Greco/Roman by design with the famous Greek columns: Ionic, Corinthian or Doric. But also as a part of this Greco/Roman architecture is the influence of Christianity. On many of these buildings

can be found portions of Scripture verses and in some cases copies of the Ten Commandments. What gives?

Whether we agree with them or not, the vast majority of the pioneers of seventeenth and eighteenth century American culture came with Christian heritage and commitments. This is not to say that all of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were self-conscious Christians. As a matter of fact most were. But even the ones who were not still thought and acted for the most part with a Christian mindset and morality. Certainly they were flawed in these views, but the overall backdrop of a thousand years of influence of Christianity in the west, especially Europe and England, was predominant. For the most part, the architects of a new Christian world wanted to create a society where neither Pope nor Constantinian Monarch was the seat of power.

Up to the time of New World, these two approaches had been the only models for the outworking of a Christian worldview. But with the dawning of America, severed from Pope and Christian King/Queen, the alternative applied was a Christian Republic. It was the old Roman Republic of representative government under the authority of the Holy Scriptures. The Ten Commandments offered the higher law on which all other law was to be based. This higher law has been called Natural Law. The Church has always believed in some form of Natural Law. Correctly understood, Scripture teaches that the world is a reflection of the moral character of God because He created it. Furthermore, since the Ten Commandments are the specific revelation of the moral character of God this is simply another way of saying that moral standard of God is part of the warp and woof of what He has made. Creation is ethical; it is not morally neutral. The moral character of the Almighty is embedded into the DNA of the universe and in particular, humanity. As the image of God, mankind is morally designed to operate according to this higher law. There is no escaping it. Romans 1 teaches us that the world is revelatory, upper case "R," meaning creation inescapably reveals who God is. All of creation has His Divine imprint. This doesn't mean creation is Divine, which is the mistake of paganism, confusing the Creator with the creator. Ethically it means that humans are designed naturally to function according to this higher law. This is why St. Paul could and often did argue that certain behavior, like homosexuality, is not natural.

Oliver Wendell Holmes at the end of the nineteenth century almost single handedly reversed the Christian views of Natural, higher, moral law in American and now western culture. He applied evolutionary theory to the field of law. He reasoned that if evolutionary philosophy is correct, there can be no natural law nor higher law. Remember, evolutionary views are based on the premise that the world is changing constantly, evolving. And if this is the case there cannot be constant, unchanging law. Holmes reasoned therefore that only precedent can become law until a new precedent is set. By definition, there can be no place for natural, moral law in the "Holmesian" philosophy of law. Senator Ted Kennedy reminded the world of this clash of worldviews at the Judge Clarence Thomas hearings when he was nominated for position on the Supreme Court. You may remember that Clarence Thomas, a committed Christian, as a matter fact member of Truro Episcopal Church, claimed belief in a higher law. Kennedy objected that such a view was not permissible in modern law. If you think the left is not

self-conscious, think again. Even the bungling “D” student, Ted Kennedy, who was dismissed from Harvard for cheating, understands the conflict of worldviews in our culture.

It goes back to the unique mixture Greco/Roman and Christian worldviews of our Christian ancestors. Their concept of a Christian society without Pope or Monarch as the head was ingenious. It allowed for a multi-denominational culture where Protestant and Catholic could live side by side. But it also permitted unbelievers to live freely as well. By implementing the old Greco/Roman concept of representative government, anyone could live in this free society as long as he obeyed the basic laws, which were a reflection of the Ten Commandments or Higher Law. They still are although they are rapidly being eroded. And when you have a Christian Greco/Roman culture without Christianity, you’re thrown back to essentially the old, pagan, pluralistic, multi-diverse Roman Empire with only the remote, vague vestiges of Christianity, which sociologists now call post modernity.

This brings me under my first application to the problem of outmoded evangelistic strategies. The post-modern Western world places the Church in a position to which contemporary western Christians are unaccustomed. It is a clash of old, paganism and Christianity. And it is worth noting just how different this is as we approach the subject of evangelism. Until recently, the Church in the West has mainly had to reach what I will call a baptized society. Most everyone was literally baptized and claimed to be a nominal Christian. I didn’t say everyone, but even the exceptions still lived generally as a baptized Christian. The evangelism therefore was essentially, and still is in my opinion, oriented to the conversion of the baptized. Certainly unconverted baptized people still exist and need to be converted. But most are no longer baptized. Consequently, I make one simple observation: To my knowledge not a single evangelism program since the first Great Awakening of the 1700s includes baptism as part of the Gospel mandate. What’s wrong with this picture? The Great Commission of Jesus places baptism dynamically and intricately in the commission. The tracts, pamphlets, sermons and evangelism crusades of the last two hundred years in American and western cultures for the most part assume baptism. Notice that the theology and practice of baptism are not part of the proclamation. Post Enlightenment methods heretofore assume it. But because it is not part of the evangelistic method, the message of Christianity, the cleansing work of Christ, and the Doctrine of the Church are all cut out of necessarily being a disciple.

Enlightenment methods also assume a creedal, classical view of the Church, which for the most part today no longer survives. For the most part, except in the few places where truly biblical and traditional Christianity continue, a creedal, classical view of the Church no longer exists. Consequently, persons can make a profession of faith to be a follower of Christ and never be brought to express that confession in terms of the catholic creeds. The result is what I call sub or deformed conversions. From our point of view as catholic Christians, however, we cannot call a person a Christian until they express their confession in terms of the catholic creeds. These creeds are the sine qua non of conversion. Apart from them, regardless of the prayer prayed or the aisle walked, the profession of faith is defective. This brings me to a second application.

A fourth application concerns the creedal message of St. Paul in a pagan, Gentile context. When the apostolic Church preached to the Jewish, biblical culture, the message focused more on the specific events of the Incarnation. And the redemptive history either began with Abraham or the Exodus/temple period. Furthermore, the simple call to believe and be baptized could be made without recapitulating the full biblical message. The latter could be assumed. But when the Gospel enters a pagan context, a fuller creedal message is developed.

If we consider most of the evangelistic tracts and pamphlets of the last two hundred years, simple outlines and prayers are used to provide a way for a person to express faith. But this is not the approach of St. Paul on Mars Hill. Nor was it the way of the early Church. The creeds expressed the content of a true confession of faith. The biblical precedent is found in the passage we have considered today. But when the context of a biblical culture collapses or is lost, without the creed as a definition of confession, commitments to Christ can be either sub Christian or even heretical. Looking at it another way, the Baptismal Office in the Book of Common Prayer asks a person to make a full confession of faith based on the catholic creed. If one is not willing to make such a confession, then the expression of faith is incomplete. The Church should not proceed with baptism unless there is some sort of extreme providential hindrance.

The demand for a fuller confession of faith is called for in our current pagan world. I believe this explains the importance of the Alpha and especially the Credo programs of evangelism. They essentially lead people to Christ by means of the Creed. These approaches to explaining the Gospel are quite different from the Roman Road, the Four Spiritual Laws, Evangelism Explosion and so forth. These methods were reasonably successful at a time when American, Western culture was essentially Christian. Although thinking critically in retrospect, the kind of Christianity produced by these program has been non-creedal and non ecclesiastical. The result has been an impotent Church, message and call to discipleship in the face of an increasingly self-conscious wicked culture. And these methods never really worked outside of Western, Christian cultures are inadequate today. It seems therefore, that creedal approaches should be utilized and developed. The rest of my presentation will therefore focus on an evangelism course named Credo.

In concluding this presentation on the Gospel goes to Mars, I am reminded of a conversation I had with my dissertation advisor, the Dr. Alister McGrath, nearly a decade ago. I was bemoaning the direction things were going in the Church and culture. His response was immediate; "Christianity will do better than ever because it always has done well in hostile environments from the very beginning." In the late 1930s there was a radio program called "War of the Worlds" about the invasion of the Martians. It was so authentic sounding that some people jumped out of windows. The invaders from Mars, however, met their demise when their systems were not able to cope with local viruses. Something so endemic to the earth's native environment destroyed them. In the end, they could not survive. In a similar way, in the end paganism cannot survive in the face of the

Gospel. It's not natural, nor is it redemptive. The true, complete Gospel offers both.
Amen.