

Is the Modern Church Repeating Paul's Mistake in Athens?

Have you noticed that there is no letter from Paul to the church in Athens? Even though he spent time there and spoke to a gathering of the city's leading citizens and most prominent philosophers (Acts 17:19), Athens is never mentioned again by Paul or any other New Testament writer.

His preaching obviously had very little impact on the city of Athens. Understanding the reason, I believe, could help save many contemporary Christians from self-destruction and enable us to impact our generation with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul's Mistake in Athens

Many New Testament scholars believe that Paul preached a watered-down version of the gospel in Athens, which resulted in there being no power in his message. Luke recounts Paul's sermon to the philosophers on the Areopagus in Acts 22. Interestingly, he quoted two pagan poets, but never mentioned Jesus, the cross or His sufferings. The closest he gets to the gospel message is when he tells them of a "Man" whom God had raised from the dead and by whom He would judge the world.

Paul was obviously disappointed in the results of his preaching in Athens, and he made a principled decision that he would never repeat that mistake. This is made clear in his first letter to the Corinthians where he reminded them that when he came to them the first time, "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2).

Remember that Corinth is 50 miles from Athens, and Paul visited Corinth for the first time after leaving Athens. This

first letter indicates that Paul was not happy with his evangelistic approach in Athens and that he had done some deep soul searching during the 2 to 3-day journey from Athens to Corinth.

The Power is in the Message

In this first letter to the Corinthians, Paul emphasizes the power of the message of the cross of Christ and stresses the importance of guarding the essence and content of that message. For example, in 1:17 he says that Christ did not send him to baptize, but to preach the gospel—"not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power" (NIV).

Do we hear what Paul is saying? He is saying that if we go too far in trying to make the gospel more cool, hip and attractive to contemporary culture, we run the risk of preaching a message that has been "emptied of its power." It seems that this is precisely what happened in Athens. Paul went too far in his effort to make the gospel acceptable to his Athenian audience and it resulted in him presenting a powerless gospel. That is why there is no "Epistle to the church in Athens."

Paul Decides to Stay on Message

Now, notice the change in Paul's approach the next time he preaches, which is in Corinth. Although they too are Greeks and value wisdom and philosophy, we do not hear him quoting any of their philosophers. Instead, we hear him reminding them.

"And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified."

The phrase "when I came to you" refers to his first visit to Corinth after being in Athens. In Athens he had not mentioned

Jesus in his message at the Areopagus. But now, arriving in Corinth, he is determined to preach nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified no matter how weak and foolish the message may sound.

God's power was manifest through Paul's preaching in Corinth and a powerful, if somewhat rowdy, Christian community was established. Interestingly, we have not one, but two letters to the church in Corinth and evidence that there was a third one. During his journey from Athens to Corinth, Paul obviously "purged" the message he had preached in Athens.

Let's Allow God to Purge the Message

Some years ago, Sue and I attended an intensive, week-long seminar on world missions. The discussions were very much centered on strategies and methodologies for completing and bringing closure to the Great Commission. After four days of lectures and discussions, someone suggested that we pray. Sue, being tired, rested her head on the table at which we were sitting, relieved that she could close her eyes and rest and no one would know the difference.

Suddenly and unexpectedly the Spirit of the Lord hit her like a bolt of lightning. She suddenly sat upright and began to weep and intercede in other tongues. It was so intense that she went into a hallway and walked back and forth weeping and praying in the Spirit.

I joined her along with one or two others and we continued to pray until the burden of prayer lifted. During the time of intercession Sue said she heard God saying, "You have been talking all week about strategies and methodologies for taking the gospel to the world, but I am concerned about the message you are taking. I want to purge the message. I want it to be My message that you take to the world."

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