

"IT MADE SENSE TO THE GREEKS"

Acts 17: 16 - 31

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The first century Greek is ideological; he is concerned for the overall integration of concepts, the determination of what is truth and what is the difference between "appearance" and "reality". There is something fundamental to the Christian appeal that made sense to great numbers of Greeks in the first century and in fact it does to the man who is viewing the landscape of reality from the Greek ideological perspective.

I think that the basic appeal of Christianity to the Greek lies in the fact that the Christian message about Jesus Christ is inclusive enough and at the same time bold enough to integrate and bring into focus other truths and ideas. It is the sheer vastness and bold sweep of the Christian idea that is appealing to the Greek in

Let me attempt to show by means of the first century setting how this works with three of the great generic teachings of the Christian faith. St. Paul arrived at Athens which in his century was a kind of prep-school city; not as academically important as Tarsus or Alexandria but a city completely saturated with the spirit of Greek ideology. When Paul walked in the center he noticed several of the Greek deities represented with statues or inscriptions along the great avenue. There was probably a statue of Diana the goddess of Ephesus, of Aphrodite goddess of Corinth, Olympus, Isis of Egypt, etc. and in order that Athens might never appear remiss in religious tolerance and in order not to neglect any of many deities of the first century there was evidently one niche left open with the appropriate inscription to that this space was reserved as a kind of catchall space just in the event a god somewhere, somehow was inadvertently omitted. The inscription on this niche was as follows: "To the unknown god." Paul decides to build his speech to the Athenians around this curious inscription.

"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. 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. 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. And they took hold of him and brought him to the Are-opagus, saying, 'May we know what this new teaching is which you present? For you bring some strange things to our ears; we wish to know therefore what these things mean.' Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

"So Paul, standing in the middle of the Are-opagus, said: 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 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. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, 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, 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.' 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. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, 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.'"

- Acts 17: 16-31

Paul electrified his hearers and all thoughtful men since that day with this incredible speech at Mars hill. What he had to say made sense to the Greeks.

(1) The New Testament teaches that at the center of everything is the one God, Father Almighty. This idea contrasts sharply with the proliferation of Greek gods, of various ranks and various special functions. Paul recommends at Mars hill a radical simplification. Paul had put his finger decisively upon the most difficult problem of the ideologically oriented individual and that is the problem of developing a criteria for evaluating the true significance of an idea. The danger that intellectualism faces is that as ideas pile up within a man's brain they tear at each other and the result is confusion, of a very impressive kind to be sure but nevertheless confusion. Simple, basic ideas are buried beneath the collection, and very often this sort of person finds himself fragmented by the very complexity of his ideological collection. Paul's words make sense. God does not divide himself up between city favorites. Ultimate reality is not actually diffused and desiccated by the fact that the city council of Athens has constructed statues all along the famous market place. This radical simplification was good news to the thoughtful Greek and still is.

(2) Consider a second generic truth of the Christian message which is equally startling: The New Testament teaches that this God is able to speak for himself and that he is great enough and good enough to find us where we are. This blunt affirmation challenges the deep seated Greek fascination with the complicated, mystical means of communication with spiritual reality. The "art" of spiritual discernment and communication with the great beyond was highly developed in Greek mysticism. How could one fail to be impressed with the skills of divination and spiritual "contact". In fact even today there is a strong appeal to many people of the promises that spiritualists make regarding their contact with the inner and outer secrets of ultimacy. But the Greeks were the best of all in the art. Take for example the famous oracle of Delphi. Strange steam bubbled up from a sulphur spring at Delphi and Greek explanation of this odoriferous steam was that a python had been slain in the hole by Apollo and the smell therefore was really the decay of the dead python. A Priestess named "Phytia" would eat a few laurel leaves, breathe deeply of the steam, promptly enter into a narcotic trance and then answer the questions of pilgrims with faultless words from the gods. In the case of the oracle of Delphi her remarkable durability was to a certain extent due to her witty answers that always had a double meaning. So a general might ask how his battle at Galatia was going to turn out and the oracle had good news for him: "You shall never be defeated as long as the sun shines!" Then as luck would have it he loses the battle in a fierce pre-dawn attack.

The Christian gospel affirms that God is able to speak for himself and he has openly done so in Jesus Christ who is the "word of God," the speech of God:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the

darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light.

"The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God."

-- John 1: 1-12

This means that religious experts with their highly specialized contact procedures are unnecessary. This is good news to men who were vainly attempting to gather up all possible answers to ultimacy, intellectual, ideological and mystical. God loves us enough that he does not play games with man's instinctive yearning for truth.

(3) The New Testament teaches that for Man's part we are called to trust God in this daily life, to know him now and to receive his love now and live as his disciples right now. The Christian call to discipleship is a broadside challenge to the Greek view of history and man's part in it. At the heart of the Greek prescriptions for individual meaning is the message of escape from the rat-race of daily existence. The Greeks are basically committed to a cyclical view of history with its hopeless, endless repetition and therefore for an individual man his best hope tests in some form of escape whether it is suicide or mystical trances complete with python fumes. The Christian Gospel views history in a radically different way. History is linear with meaningful beginning and meaningful fulfillment and at its center the radical intervention of God the creator who has redeemed man and called us to live without fear or escape upon the very line of history where we were born. We refuse the options that add up to self rejection or historical rejection. This is the meaning of the resurrection where Christ won in our behalf the battle with death and with meaninglessness so that now we in our concrete existence have the privilege to live, move and have our being right here on the earth without pessimism or fatalism but as disciples who are beloved and are therefore empowered to love others and even ourselves.

When the Greeks heard all of these things they were struck with the credibility and importance of Christianity; Christ is refreshing good news to the intellectual.