

Chapter 3

From Antioch to (Your Location) by Way of Mars Hill

Introduction: Of the several sayings my father would on occasion use as a review of a just happening conversation was this one: “Those people act like they get up in a new world every day!” His critique intended to convey the thought that the other persons acted sporadically, did not seem to know where they were, wandered literally and in their thinking, were mostly unhelpful when they came into any context. When they entered a room, in many ways it was like two good helpers left.

Maybe you’ve had some of those same experiences. We have to be careful; for we can become cynics with this kind of thing. After all, we do get up in a new world every day. Part of the previous chapter’s emphases should have gotten you to thinking about how Creation is constantly unfolding. No set of clouds, no sunrise or sunset, ever looks the same as the day or any days before. Each new day offers a different perspective on how we think about a matter, how we relate to others, how we consider perspectives beyond our own.

And, there are too many individuals across faith traditions who utilize the former approach, though—more Rip Van Winkle like than being appreciative of the unfolding of Creation before our eyes. Too many are simply puzzled and befuddled by our current context of trying to do and be the Church, for example. Those now who are variously labeled as nones, dones, and somes have caught on to this befuddlement and so are leaving congregational contexts to others. Their responses can be encapsulated in the cliché “There’s nothing to be seen or done here.”

The others, those who remain, are products of generations before them who have continued a codification of propositions which centuries, even decades, ago may well have had biblical and theological undergirding. The codification process, though, has devolved and early meanings have been eviscerated. Now among a great many groups calling themselves Christians are those who are articulating interpretations of propositions, merging half-baked theological concepts with those of whatever techniques become handy for their self-advancement—often misconstrued political platforms. We live in a time, not unlike the Apostle Paul’s time, when he asked the Galatians what Gospel they were promoting. Indeed, contemporary groups and individuals have reconstructed what can be called the Gospel message.

Ironically in becoming relevant to others who join in the same tunnel vision/echo chamber methodologies, they become less and less relevant to the larger culture and even their own sub-culture. They have lost touch with any sense of a master narrative guiding their theology and ethics.

The intent here, as with Chapter 2’s content, is to offer a broader and deeper perspective than we might ordinarily involve our decision making. Here as with chapter 2’s content is the suggestion to find ways this content to move through the Triads reviewed in other chapters. What particularly does the place of the Church have in one’s Christian ethical decision making?

For, again from the previous chapter, we should be recognizing signals, clues, cues, even processes already in the culture which are, ironically, more Gospel shaped—those that are the contours in the New Testament—than those coming from a great many congregational gatherings.

The Church?

Fall backs to congregational responses of decades ago of course fail to be able to find any commonalities, common causes, with contemporary cultural paradigms. Even the response of “we are just attempting to be a New Testament church” fails to comprehend that concept. This chapter attempts to identify some of those New Testament contours. The core of it is built around a paper I presented at the Baptist World Alliance Commission on Christian Ethics in Santiago, Chile in July 2012.

Those folk who provided congregational rearing for me, as I have given allusion in other places, were of the sort that they considered themselves to be the contemporary model of the New Testament church. They relied upon the “Trail of Blood” composition, which truthfully was a poorly done mishmash of church history so as to give a connection all the way back to John the Baptist. Here I have to say, “so little time and so many trails that devolve into circles, mazes, and even heresies,” if I try to undo that mess.

The fact of the matter, a more honest conception, of what constitutes the modeling after the “New Testament church” has to have the quick comeback—which one? The church people of my rearing matched what they considered their admirable traits with selective reading of the New Testament, and concluded they were the true New Testament church. What they missed, however, is that this searching and matching has gone on for centuries.

Any particular group who arrived at a consensus, or were told what the consensus should be, then sacramentalized their model. The history of this forms the evolution of the Roman Catholic Church, the disagreements among the power brokers, the splits, the Reformation, the springing up of what became denominations. As one lays alongside the development of the Western Church, juxtapose the economic history of Western culture, as well. The formations have most interesting economic and sociological connections, with theological glossings.

The glossings, the sacramentalizations, have set then the language, the worship style, those hired to lead congregations and the other institutions that have sprung up under the rubric of “church,” who is admitted to “the fellowship/membership/communion”—still toward making claims of being the New Testament church incarnate in whatever era this formation is happening.

The question is still begged, however. Which New Testament model? We do have to make some more serious investigations and distinctions. For example, there was the Syrian Antioch church (Acts 11) and the Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13). Each and both reflected a strong Christological centering, though. In Antioch of Syria followers of Christ were first called Christians; in Antioch of Pisidia, Luke related that Paul preached in this manner: “You Israelites, and others who fear God, listen” (Acts 13:16).

Paul built upon Hebrew history for his exposition and moved quickly from Abraham, Moses, and David to Jesus Christ. We need to recognize Paul began with those people in the cultural and theological context they already had.

I propose that in the millennia since Paul, too much attention has been given to these Antioch contexts and styles, though, with not nearly enough attention given to Paul's approach in Athens. We need to include for our sense of being and doing church, doing and being the Gospel, the matter of Paul's visit to Athens and particularly the time highlighted by Luke, Paul's conversation around an on the Areopagus, or Mars Hill (Acts 17).

Mars Hill

The hill is an outcropping of marble, on the northwest side of the outcropping upon which the Parthenon was built. Immediately to the north and below is the Greek agora or "gathering place." There the social, economic, and political center of Greek life happened.

The Areopagus was the meeting place, before the "demos" or citizens of democracy came to be, of a council who acted on behalf of the citizens in legal matters, not unlike a court. When one stands on the Areopagus, there is the realization that the agora is below a steep incline but linked to the outcropping by a pathway wide enough that in its time a chariot could have made the passage up or down.

The Parthenon, the center of Greek worship, was a stone's throw away, if the stone would be thrown by a contemporary left fielder making a throw all the way to home plate. The proximity speaks of the interfacing of Greek sociology, economy, and theology.

By Paul's time, the Romans had conquered most of the former Greek empire, and Athens had been under the Romans control for nearly 100 years. The Areopagus, or the Hill of Ares—the Greek god of war, became Mars Hill, named after the Roman god of war. The Romans did allow a form of the council to continue to meet there.

These persons after the tradition of Aristotle were philosophers of law and life. Their discussions would have included the search and application of the nature of law, why should there be laws, what constitutes the breaking of a law, how can law(s) be applied. Obviously, these were discussions of morality, of ethics, and looking for the basis of fair and just laws constituted a form of what has to be called natural law.

Contemporary preachers I know love to declare about this occasion of how Paul really told off the Athenian philosophers, and yes theologians, that day. Those preacher declarations are delivered, of course, using the current replication of the Antioch churches—lots of language which apparently only the real believers can understand, or everyone assumes is being understood. What gets missed, and something I want to emphasize is that, indeed, Paul's communication—style of preaching, teaching, and evangelism (to use more contemporary terms)—at Mars Hill was not the same approach which he used in the churches of Antioch name.

That which follows is my attempt at unpacking the ramifications of Paul's conversation, dialogue, and if you must call it such, sermon, at Mars Hill. The developing outline falls generally around the questions of What was Paul's message?; Why was Paul's message delivered that way to be considered important?; and How do we emulate Paul's style of communication? I have to add quickly that exploring something like this event has to be filtered through some creative imagination that recognizes there was an organic vitality involved; that Paul, I think, understood the conversation was anything but a static, formulaic, automaton produced experience.

The questions raised will of necessity find a necessary blending along the way. But you must recognize that my suggestions are intended to resist the static, formulaic, automaton like propositions that have been codified as being the way for contemporary Christians to communicate with others.

What Was Paul's Message?

Whether at one of the Antiochs or at the Areopagus, Paul's central message was about how he understood the place of Jesus the Christ in life. Along the way, particularly after delving into the Mars Hill event more deeply, I began to use less and less the term evangelism, drawn from the evangelion, and replace it with kerygma, the Greek term for proclaiming a message, particularly one with an existential, in the here and now, application.

Again, "evangelism" has come to mean a program, an approach, a style, a mechanism, that often fails to convey much more than a superficial understanding of the application of the Gospel, the good news. Too often, the Gospel, the good news, is not understood beyond the propositions, a content list, set forth by congregational leaders, with a one size fits all approach.

A not uncommon platitude from these leaders is dismissively stated toward those who fail to take them up on their transactional offering, as "they say they are not religious but are spiritual." Unfortunately, these leaders fail to recognize those people (now the nones, dones, and somes) are more theologically attuned in the broadest and deepest sense than the leader types, who, frankly, have melded their style of worship, extension of "join us" as the meaning of the term "religious."

Further this "religious" persuasion becomes so narrow that these self-styled "religionists" think their approach is the only true expression of worship. Their image of God is so narrow and shallow they cannot recognize Spirit moving through other cultures and other approaches of attempting to commune with Transcendence, Supreme Being, Creator, Great Spirit, the Ground of Being, and on and on, further failing to recognize that the Hebrews, on whom so many of these leaders' sermons are based considered themselves incapable of naming "God."

Looking at the Gospel from the perspective of those who are not in a congregational setting, or have left such, we realize that "good news" can mean a variety of things to people. We have only to look at how Jesus met people, so many different circumstances, so many different understandings of words and actions being good news.

Kerygma is also a style, but may vary from context to context, from proclaimer to proclaimer, and certainly immediately projects a more dynamic connection than that of an objectified, commodified content. With the conversation at Mars Hill, one can identify the ages old Aristotelian style of rhetoric as Paul provided the what, the content, the message, he wanted to contribute to the conversation.

One would have to say this content was no different in quality, maybe in quantity, than his conversation in the Antiochs. His kerygma, proclamation style, was different, though. This content/style combination is important for any generation. The logos, or message for Aristotle, the words used, are important.

We can re-learn the lessons from Paul's delivery at Mars Hill.

Evidence abounds that Paul's cultural context, the Roman Empire, what can be called a pre-modern culture, in basic principles is very much like our own twenty-first global culture—a mix of all kinds of cultural dynamics and perceptions of justice, mercy, what it meant to act courageously.

The Epicureans and Stoics are still with us. And the Cynics who were surely there at Mars Hill are certainly with us. Notice Paul connected with those people from a different starting place than with those in the cities called Antioch.

The philosophers/lawyers/theologians were attempting to understand and find resolution for a sense of meaning and purpose. The philosophers in any age are looking for integrating dynamics of character and action. Paul understood their search, possibly through more layers than they, so his presentation, his style, his content, his kerygma, was multidimensional.

There was a beginning place—the Beginning—Creation—with which the Greek philosophers could quickly connect. Again, Aristotle, a Renaissance person before the Renaissance, provided a bridge that ran between the philosophers and Paul. Paul expanded upon a cultural paradigm known by them to broaden them beyond their univocal, linear thinking. For us, we should recognize the points of adaptation of the kerygma both to provide opportunity to expand but also to be able to recognize the potential points of resistance.

Too much of our preaching, teaching, ethics, and “evangelism” misses such wholistic application. Rules-laden religion perpetuates because of insecurity and fear—on the part of the religionists already given allusion, ironically. An Age of Enlightenment, a direct successor to the Hellenistic approach to life, dwells on either-or, this or that, reductionist thinking. The perpetuators use the reductionist approach to spread fear, insecurity, in order to gain a following, attempting to remake their followers into their image and not Christ's.

The Mars Hill approach is a less secure starting place for many of us, but we need to figure out how we can move in this global culture we have now, in the face of those who press for provincial, nativist, anti-global boundaries, taking our message into the free market place of ideas and offer the Gospel on its own merits proclaiming it as clearly and cleanly as we can.

Unfortunately, what is showing up is that our traditional, church jargon, even jingoistic approaches, are not making it across the cultural divides, these days. That is the case in the United States and can be recognized in many places where American missiological styles have and are being used. Adapting to starting where other people are in their understanding of what spirituality is, their search for significance and meaning, their need for community and relationship—there was Paul’s methodology.

Note that whether in one of the Antiochs or in Athens at Mars Hill, wherever he started, Paul always got to Jesus, and not just his death, burial, resurrection—which factoids are the sum total of some of the aforementioned types’ sense of “Gospel.” Paul related about a living Jesus who could pick up wherever Paul’s audience might be able to eventually get to Jesus, the source of Good News, the Gospel. Read those epistles attributed to Paul to see how quickly he moved from theology to ethics, all meant for day to day living toward a lifetime of such lifestyle and mindstyle.

Why Was Paul’s Message, Delivered That Way, Important?

Paul understood that which drives delivery of the Gospel, kerygma, is God’s energies toward human beings and the expectations of God that humans communicate those purposes to other human beings. As well, the kerygma-empowered humans will communicate these purposes with a degree of abstract facets but also personal, specific facets to others. There are values all through those two sentences, and they are values which need to be focused upon and developed. These basic values, which run throughout the major world religions—justice/accountability, mercy/lovingkindness, and courage—will be explored in the next three chapters.

At the least, I think we can maintain that whatever values we live by, truly live by, do shape our attitudinal selves, which in turn shape our actions. For Paul, the Good News was really good news for all of what we are and what we are becoming.

I have known too many people who have a knack for turning the Good News into Bad News. Usually, such persons have not investigated the context in which they find themselves and asked, “Just what is good news for the people to whom we relate the Gospel?” The answers we are able to find can begin the form of our kerygma for those particular ones.

For the Athenians at Mars Hill, we cannot forget they perceived life to have been reduced to that of reflecting on “the good old days.” That day’s dialogue took place a long stone’s throw from the Acropolis, with remnants of the glory days still apparent. Also, this once majestic edifice, the center of the Greeks’ politics and theology reflected the mutilations of the Persian invasions. By this point, they have been taken over by the parasitic Roman Empire.

Barely beneath the surface for the Areopagus Athenians was almost certainly a deep sense of despair over what might have been. I do not have a difficult time imagining them using their philosophical arguments on each other as a defense mechanism so as not to have to think about why they were in the context they were in. In some ways they were struggling with some of the same ultimate questions of life which we find in Job.

Is not this struggle endemic to humanity, though? Perhaps the “how should we live life” is being asked, but the “why should we live life any particular way” question is embedded in the discussion which the Athenians initiated with Paul. Those people were looking for values by which to think and act.

Again, Paul’s beginning with Creation and the Creator is an example for us. Paul put the “Ground of all Being” in front of the Athenians, certainly; but, in retrospect we should recognize he presented to the philosophers the “Ground of all Doing” as well.

In short, the values by which to live life are found incarnated in the God Paul described to them. Those values can be reviewed by us as we read Acts 17. Certainly, we can begin to make associations into the Pauline literature to see those delineated more specifically. At the least, those values form what we would call the kerygma not only for individual evaluation and assimilation but also for a communal, congregational, perspective.

In an abbreviated way, Paul introduced the Athenians to Christ-centered moral discernment. Only a few of those Areopagus types determined that Jesus Christ was the reference point of life for which they had been searching. They allowed their worldview to change.

We have no record that anything like a congregation ever generated in Athens. That lack of record has constrained some contemporary researchers to declare the Areopagus experience for Paul a failure. But some of the philosophers recognized the Aristotelian element about Paul—*pathos*—that indicated Paul established rapport with his audience. He was not simply spinning tales, talking about the next, new faddish thing, as some of their colleagues did day by day.

Rather, Paul exhibited, incarnated, the values to which he pointed. Questions for all of us is what are the effects of the kerygma on ourselves? Is there transformation happening in me?” We must stay attuned to whether or not the kerygma is embedding deeply in our own lives. In short, we should more and more become the reflection of the Gospel.

This idea of becoming more the incarnation and reflection of the Gospel prods us toward dealing with the necessary value conflicts people face. The objective of moving a congregation toward being a community of moral discernment provides some of the rationale as to why Paul delivered his message as he did.

One caution to raise here is to be aware of the potential narcissism that may raise its head. One’s ego may get in the way of a whole group becoming more morally discerning.

How Do We Emulate Paul’s Style?

There is an accountability with each disciple of Jesus Christ to be involved in kerygma wherever and whenever we can. Diligent, deliberate attention is needed toward how we may do that with the best and most impact. Timing can be everything.

The Gospel is both personal and social in application. Beginning with kerygma, we should naturally see development of *koinonia* (relatedness/fellowship), *didache* (teaching), and *diakonia*

(taking care/ministry). Each of these interface with the other so that as one finds a beginning point in one, there is possibility of connecting to the others. Diakonia, ministry, for example, may be the touch point for those looking for fellowship and a group for mutual support and care.

We cannot forget that Paul was an extraordinarily well-educated person of his time. No doubt he had learned from Gamaliel, as he had many other things of Jewish tradition and theology, the rabbinic style of teaching. He had acquired the skills of persuasive rhetoric along the way, likely reaping some of the benefits of being a Roman citizen and educational opportunities open to such. Between the Antiochs and Mars Hill and beyond, he apparently was in a constant mode of refining and honing his skills.

Can we do anything less? My first suggestion is that one become as educated as possible in the disciplines I call theological education—which can be informal and formal. A constant self-reminder is that each of us cannot just emulate an admired personage. Self-appointed successors are often poor copies. Each of us must find and build upon the natural gifts and skills we bring to the events of life and combine those with the best of what we can learn from others.

What Is Going On in the World?

If we do wake up in what amounts to a new world every day, how do we adapt to such a phenomenon? The style attributed to Karl Barth is not a bad one to adopt—that is, face life with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. I am concerned with the North American penchant toward not being informed by local, state, regional, national, and global news. Rather the tendency among a huge swath of the population moving in the conspiracy theory realm for their perception of information.

In their own way the Athenians were keeping up with one segment of news and cultural events. Some of the genius which Paul brought to the setting was his, for that time, already widespread travels. He had learned to adapt quickly to the place where he found himself. I have watched too many former students move from the school setting to a church setting and find difficulty with a congregation early on, mainly because the graduate has not learned ahead of the sub-cultural setting into which he or she has moved.

In a manner that can only be called provincial, the former-student-turned church-staff person attempted to bring the congregation to her or his presuppositions of how the meeting schedule should be, details of the worship order, what style of worship should be followed, theological perspectives without attention to those already there, or place of the newly hired person in the setting. Little effort or energy was expended toward building authenticity and rapport with the congregation.

Too many of us have joined into an exclusivistic, even xenophobic (fear of the unknown) enterprise, that we dare call the Church. One result is being out of touch with the cultural context we move in, all the way from local to global. One result is that as any system, organization, institution—the Church, for instance—becomes an end in itself, it will begin to erode, fragment, and ultimately hardly resemble its originators' visions.

Yet, Be Willing to Call into Question Prevailing Cultural Paradigms

Good kerygma engagement is going to put into place a tension between where the constituencies are and where the message content is pointing.

Even with a somewhat, lowest common denominator beginning place, Creation, Paul prodded at the Athenians way of thinking about life. With his attention to Creation he still asked the Athenians to re-imagine life, this world, and humanity's part in renewing Creation. Thus, Paul pushed beyond their usual ways of reflection, gave them some common symbols but with new content toward any of them picking up on the Gospel.

I do not think it too far a stretch that Paul attempted to address the Athenians style of thinking not only from the perspective of being the people who pulled together the principles of geometry, but also those who produced timeless sculpture and theater—not only deductive, but inductive perspectives; not only the immanent, but the transcendent matters of life. Paul used all these venues of thinking in order to draw upon and help reform the Greeks' imaginations.

Last But Not Least: Relate Scripture Through the Spirit of Creation and Culture

Our kerygma must be more than a well stated sociological treatise, more than conjectural, psychological counseling, and reflect more than a superficial biblical hermeneutic. Even as we attempt to draw others to Christ, we should be drawing closer to Christ ourselves, becoming more mature disciples. This is where the ideas of "Spirit generated" exercises, disciplines, actions come together. Perhaps here can be brought to the surface the matters which have been tacitly part of this chapter already. That is, these practices, these hermeneutics, these presentations call for understanding the power of narrative, metaphor, and language which clarifies, rather than stupefies. Dare I say too much "Christianese" has been of the stupefying nature.

Transparent communications should draw attention to beliefs or facts which people hold, convictions or principles by which they live, but also call for a transformation of one's worldview as needed. Churches get formed and operate, for example, with language that sounds like gospel language, but there are often different meanings beneath the surface which divide among engagement language, perhaps. And engagement language may be directed at what for many decades has been called missions. Even that term has morphed in several directions.

As well, there are those who speak in terms that are supported more by "beliefs" language, creedal terms. For these, the list of beliefs is the composite of the Gospel. Of course, others emphasize how moral guidelines—which can have a variety of sources—should be followed. Those who can find convergence and balance among what has become divergent applications all called Gospel will be those who find the most satisfactory appreciation of recognizing a new world. In fact, a new way to look at and relate to all things, all people, and especially to God. Ah, the promise of hope, a way to see through what otherwise can be a dreariness and drag upon our existence, persona, our very souls.

A prayerful conclusion—Let us pray we that when we lay our heads down this evening, or whenever that happens today, we can imagine the end of the world as we know it; and we do wake up in a new world the next day—let us pray that we wake up with a sense of hope and adventure spawned by Holy Spirit to engage this new world leaning into the future, with the wisdom of the past, to meet God wherever we find ourselves. Amen.

For further discussion:

1. There are no records about any Christian congregation(s) that formed around Paul's visit to Athens and give support to those who consider Paul failed in his efforts there. What categories of reference are they using to make such declarations? What do you think? What about the few whom Luke said believed and followed Paul?
2. Do you agree or disagree with this statement: chapters 2 and 3 of this book form two parts of a larger whole?
3. Do chapters 2 and 3 help you understand the perspectives of the nones, dones, and somes any better than you have?
4. Are you able to find Chapters 2 and 3 useful toward not only individual/personal understanding of the Triads already introduced?
5. How does Paul's presentation, conversation, on Mars Hill compare to Jesus' conversations?