

TABLE TALK

Official Publication of the LMS-USA

...these words... shall be upon your heart; you shall teach them... and talk of them... Deut. 6:6,7



November 2018

Vol. 25 No. 4

As announced in the May 2018 issue of this newsletter, the annual Conference and Convention of the LMS-USA was held on June 9th and 10th. One of the unique features of the LMS is, that from the beginning, it was determined that the clergy and laity of the church body should meet annually, in conference. In that conference, papers are presented and discussed pertaining to doctrine and to practice, as well as other issues pertinent to the day. These annual gatherings have been, without exception, some very special gatherings.

This years gathering was no exception. The Saturday Conference theme was, *Truth in a Post-Truth Era*. The issue of truth was the focus of a couple of articles in the last issue of *Table Talk*. The truth we are dealing with is *the truth* as it pertains to God, and to the person, work, and teachings of Jesus Christ; and for us, the message of Salvation by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. An important matter with regard to this truth, with respect to us in our day, was subject of one of the papers presented, namely, how *the truth* can be understood in the post-truth era in which we are living. It would have been worthwhile to have included that paper in this issue, however in that it was a power-point presentation such inclusion would not do the paper justice.

But there is another issue that is important for us to consider in our time. Namely, the role of the Church with regard to the truth. The role of the Jewish Church in the time of the Old Testament was to serve and bear witness to the one true God, and to point people to the coming Messiah and Savior of the World. When the Messiah/Jesus had come to earth and was to set out on His ministry "He proclaimed, the gospel of God, saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel'" (Mk. 1:14-15). When our Lord had completed His work on earth, and upon His ascension into heaven, He commissioned His disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20).

He who came to this earth to bear witness to the truth (Jn. 18:37), now sent his followers to bear witness to the truth, and for that same purpose the church was born (see Acts 2)... and that has been the role of the New Testament church since its inception... through history... and on into our day. The church in this world, as a whole, has not always been faithful in its task. However, the Lord of the Church has seen to it that there has always been, and there will always be, a remnant that is faithful.

Lord empower your church to "Spread the reign of God the Lord, Spoken, written, mighty Word." (Hymn #830, LSB, Concordia Publishing)

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The Church, The Pillar of Truth

Rev. John S. Erickson

The apostle Paul writes to young Timothy, "I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15).

Paul was absent from Timothy and the church in which Timothy was ministering, and not knowing how long he would be absent, he wanted Timothy to know how he and the members of the church should conduct themselves. In the verses preceding our verse Paul gave very practical instructions concerning these things. But what I want to focus on this afternoon, is what we see here of Paul's understanding as to what one of the main functions of the church ought to be.

First of all, Paul did not understand the church as merely a place for public worship, and he is not giving instruction as to the conduct that should take place within that setting. Rather he understands the church as people, as the body of believers, as the body of true believers. He makes reference to the "household of God" because it is in that place where God dwells. Previously God's peculiar residence was in the temple at Jerusalem. But now that temple had been destroyed and it is in the church of Christ that God now dwells among his people (v. 15).

Paul adds that the church is the church of the living God. This would impress on young Timothy the seriousness of the nature of the duty that he was to undertake. What Timothy did in the church, what he did among the body of believers, pertained to the honor and welfare of the church of the living God, and thus he ought to have a sense of the importance of his role in a right functioning of that church.

This brings us to the crux of the matter - What is, or ought to be, one of main functions of the church in this world? We find the answer in the last portion of verse 15. The church is "the pillar" it is the "bulwark" (RSV); the "foundation" (NIV, YLT) of the truth. [Note the definite article here. Not *a* truth or *some* truth that is out there somewhere, but *the* truth. *There is a definite truth or body of truth.*] There is more that could be said here, but the sum and substance of what I want to get at is this, that the truth of God, the revealed truth which God had given to save the world, has been entrusted to the church. The church was designed to preserve it (the truth) pure, to defend it, and to pass it on (to disseminate it, to communicate it) to future times. And this means, and this is what Paul was seeking to impress on Timothy, that every one entrusted with the affairs of the church must commit themselves to a working out of this duty with a profound sense of his or her responsibility.

Paul speaks of the church as being a pillar of the truth. The word "pillar" means a column. We might think of a column such as might support a building. But it has reference also to any solid prop or support. In Galatians 2:9, Paul writes concerning James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars of the church. In Revelation 3:12 the Lord speaks of true believers as those who will "conquer" and He is going to make them "pillar(s) in the temple of God." Referring here to the church it quite obviously means that the church is the support of the truth as is a pillar of a building. The pillar incorporated into a building sustains it in the midst of the war of elements, against the natural tendency to fall, and amidst the assaults which may be made on it, thus preserving it when it would otherwise

tumble into ruin. Likewise the church. The church is entrusted with the business of maintaining the truth, of defending it from the assaults of error, and of transmitting it to future times. The truth is upheld in the world by the church. The people of the world have no interest in defending the truth. Thus, the fact that the Truth is preserved and transmitted from age to age points directly to the fact that the church has been faithful in carrying out its role in the world. Likewise, the degree to which the Truth is preserved and transmitted from age to age will be in direct proportion to the degree of the faithfulness of the church in the carrying out of its role in the world.

Notice that in addition to the word "pillar", Paul also speaks of the church as the "buttress" of truth. The NIV renders it the "foundation", the KJV, "foundation", the RSV, "bulwark". The meaning here then would be that the truth is supported by the church, as a structure is by a pillar. The stability of the Truth on earth is dependent on the church.

But it is also the case that truth is that upon which the Church stands. "For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11)... even as we sing, *The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord*. He who is Truth is the foundation that makes the church fixed, and solid, and permanent. The Truth is that secure base on which the church stands amidst storms and tempests. The Truth is what renders the church firm when systems of error are swept away as a house that is built on the sand (Matt. 7:25-27). That we have Truth in this world, and that that Truth is preserved from age to age, is due to the fact that the church is itself founded on the Rock. Thus the gates of hell cannot prevail against it, and no storms of persecution can overthrow it. Other systems of religion are swept away; other opinions change; other forms of doctrine vanish; but the

knowledge/truth of the great system of redemption through Jesus Christ, is preserved on earth unshaken. Why? Because the church is preserved, and because its foundation cannot be moved.

Now, something important in all this... When we are referring here to the church being a pillar and foundation, one may well bring to mind the creeds of the church, or the decisions, through the centuries, of synods and/or councils. Even within our own LMS, you can look to our several statements, i.e., our statement on the Word, or that on the Holy Spirit. You can refer to articles of our constitution pertaining to the faith. But I don't think this is what Paul had in mind here. We know, all too well in our day, that the various Christian denominations and even churches within those denominations have their creeds and statements of faith, and doctrinal positions that they *say* they ascribe to. But what does all that really mean?

We go back in our history, only some 35 years, and many of us were members of one or another Lutheran church body. And if you look back at those churches' faith documents you will find that things look pretty good. In fact I would guess, that in most cases, they looked very good. But then we find that what much of the church leadership and teachers and clergy held to at that time, was not so good. Much was not in line with the clear teachings of Scripture. What was often times being taught and preached was not in line with the truth of Scripture, was not in line with the statements made in ecumenical creeds of the church, or in line with what previous church doctrinal positions papers clearly indicated. And this is nothing new. Even Paul in his letters, and Peter in his letters, and Jude, all give warning of false teachings creeping into the church way back in the earliest days of the church. Likewise, what is to guarantee that the documents we value today will continue to be given credence by those who will

be members of our congregation or church body in the years ahead. So, as I indicated, I do not believe Paul is making reference to the various creeds or confessions of synod or council decisions made in the Church as to being its pillar and or foundation of truth.

Rather, I would side with the Bible commentators who see Paul referring here to the "living spirit of truth and piety in and among the assembly of believers that make up the church." Christians believers who make up the church, men, women, and children holding to the truth (i.e., the invisible church)... it is they who are the pillar and foundation of that truth that Paul, as God's spokesman, calls upon, to preserve and in turn to pass on, to future generations.

For many, piety is a dirty word. But what is true piety? Piety speaks of devoutness. It speaks of holiness of life, of reverence, of faith, of duty. When we think of the church at the time when our Lord came into this world, it was Elizabeth, and Zechariah, and Mary, and Simeon, and Anna, and unnamed others like them, who demonstrated a godly spirit at that that time. Such persons were the foundation and pillars of the church in that generation. Read of them again in Luke chapters 1 and 2. Simeon and Anna in their old age, Zechariah and Elizabeth - and they were getting up in years - but then Mary, likely a teenager... all devout believers in God, and in his Word, as evidenced in their holy living. Well this is what Paul is speaking of as being the pillar and foundation of the church. The people of God, true believers, in whom is found the living spirit of truth and piety in the church itself. And as the church continues in this way to live, the Truth of God will be perpetuated among the men, women, and children in this world.

Now in this task of being the pillar and foundation and perpetrator of the truth of God, a tool is necessary, and the church and individual believers

who make up the church are not left without that tool. That tool is Holy Scripture. And I might add, that is the only tool. God has revealed and preserved divine Truth in a book of which He is the author. And the church, if it is the church, and remember the church is made up of people... they, we, are to learn how to dig into that book [*Thy word is like a garden Lord...*] so we might learn what those things are that God reveals to us in its pages. What is in that book, if taken to heart, will cause people to be elevated to the heights of praise and honor to God. That book, what is in that book, the place that book should hold among the people, is what Luther fought over. The Church of his day had sublimated Scripture as a secondary source of revelation to itself. But Divine Truth is not in a church, it's not in a bishop, it's not in a pope, it's not in a denomination, it's not in experience, it's not in intuition, it's not in ecstasy. **Divine truth, all of it, is in a book - the Bible.** And Martin Luther became convinced that God spoke only in that book. And that what God said in that book sat in judgment on the Church, rather than the reverse. All this was absolutely revolutionary to the church of that time. That book alone, Luther was convinced, provided the truth that saves, the truth that sanctifies, and that every time that book spoke, it spoke authoritatively.

The Bible, as our LMS Brief Statement on Scripture has it, "is without error [in other words it is true, absolutely true/truthful] in all it touches, whenever and however it speaks whether in matters of faith, doctrine, history, geography, or science." We confess this is true with regard to the Bible in its original autographs. But we can also know this is true with regard to the "good" translations we have access to today that are, as we well know, several generations removed from the extinct original autographs [see "The Divinely Inspired, Inerrant, and Infallible Original Auto-

graphs - But Can We Say More?" - <http://www.lmsusa.org/> and click on "Educational Resources"]. Obviously, if we want truth in the Bible, it will mean one cannot take things out of context, add to, or take away from the words of the text. It will mean one cannot give to the words of Scripture meanings not intended, or consider anything outside of Scripture (current understandings of science, philosophy, sociology, your or my insights or feelings) as being on par with the words of Scripture. As Luther stated it, "That book alone" [i.e., Scripture] is the standard of truth, all else must be brought into submission to it.

I mentioned that the church is people. People are to be the pillars of truth. It is people that are to be the standard bearers of truth in the world. And central to the proper carrying out of this responsibility is that they actually do hold to the truth (i.e., Scripture) themselves.

[You will notice that I continue to define truth, "truth (i.e., Scripture)." I do so because the word truth as used in the church at large is far too often not connected to Scripture in any real honest way. But I want it defined as to what Scripture actually says in the plain, ordinary, meaning of the words used as found in their context]

It is to the church that the admonition is given in Hebrews 13:9, "Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings." As Christians, we should have settled and fixed points of belief. We do have some of what should be settled points of belief in condensed form in the three Ecumenical Creeds. But what is necessary is that these points of belief are not merely statements in a book, or on paper, and/or that they are not merely words repeated by rote in our worship services, but that they are points of belief firmly fixed in our minds and lived out in our lives.

As mentioned already, these

points of belief find their root in what we find in the pages of Scripture. Paul writes, "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 1:11-15).

Believers (members of the Church) are not to hold to an opinion just because they had held to it in the past or because it was an old, well established opinion. At the same time we should not forbid ourselves or others in following the leanings of truth if it means having to abandon what was held to previously. What we are cautioned against is a vacillating spirit and the tendency to be too ready to believe something to be real or true, or to give in to any novelty and/or embrace an opinion just because it is new or different. The author of Hebrews is likely making reference to the Judaizing teachers of his day, and to their various doctrines regarding their ceremonial observances and traditions. But clearly this warning is applicable to Christians and the Church of our day also. A religious opinion, once embraced on what was regarded good evidence, or in which we have been trained, should not be abandoned too easily. Truth should always be followed, but only after careful inquiry (note the Bereans - Acts 17:11).

Think in our day of the way people, yes even people in the church, are embracing anti-scriptural teachings with regard to, for example, creation, sexuality, marriage

and the family, the value of life (i.e., abortion, assisted suicide), the explaining away of the miracles recorded in the Bible, prophecy, the passing off of many historical accounts in Scripture as myth, the office of the ministry, to name a few. We cannot claim to hold to Scripture as true, or to God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) as true, if we do not hold to all that is in Holy Scripture as true.

Now, in a practical way, how can the church fulfill her role as a pillar and foundation of the truth? Or maybe the question might be worded this way, "How can the church in our day be equipped in order that she might be faithful to her duty?" I believe the answer, to put it simply, centers in this. That she be taught the right handling of the Scripture. Paul admonished young Timothy in this regard. "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, *rightly handling the word of truth*" (2 Tim. 2:15).

There are many passages of Scripture that speak to the importance of the Word in all of this. And it isn't just that one should have a Bible in their possession. It isn't that one should simply go to church to hear the Bible being read or expounded upon. It isn't even that one should simply read the Bible for themselves. Rather it is that the words of the Bible should be heard, received, and accepted for what they are, i.e., the truth, and then taken into one's mind and heart, believed, made a part of one's very being, kept/obeyed, and continued in. [Luke 11:28; John 8:24, 31, 37, 51] "Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:22).

It is Paul who informs us that saving faith comes from what is heard.. and what is heard comes by preaching, the preaching of Christ. This ties in well with the great commission given to the Apostles and in

turn to the Church by our Lord. "Go... and make disciples... baptizing and teaching..." and in turn following the example of John the Baptist, the forerunner of our Lord, and the Lord Himself... they went forth preaching. And the day the church was born, it was by means of preaching that the Word went forth. The preaching of repentance and forgiveness of sins. The preaching, as Paul spoke of it, as the preaching of Christ and Him crucified.

The Word must be preached, proclaimed, taught, witnessed to, and lived out in the world. The Word is truth. Every word of Scripture is given by God and is true. Therefore the Word, all the Word must be proclaimed... not just a favorite word or verse should be a pastor's basis for a sermon or Bible Study, not a working to twist the word(s) of Scripture to more or less fit so that the Bible can say what one wants it to say. The words, the meaning of words (in the original and today), the order of words, punctuation, the setting, the context, the genre of the text, all these things are important... extremely important!

I find myself often in disagreement with Bible preacher and teacher John MacArthur, but in this I have to agree, when he points out three errors that need to be avoided if the church is to rightly handle the Word of truth. And the first is that in preaching and in teaching one must not make a point at the price of proper interpretation. In other words, one needs to be very careful in not making the Bible say just what you want it to say. We see ample examples of this today in churches attempting to justify the gay and lesbian lifestyle, and same sex marriage, and abortion, the ordination of women, and not so few other things on the basis of Scripture. It can't be done, at least it cannot be done honestly. One cannot in any way justify the lesson of Sodom and Gomorrah as being that of lack of hospitality rather than that of the sin of sodomy

and homosexuality.

A second thing MacArthur says must be avoided in the use of God's Word is superficial interpretation. This is very common in the church. People will say, "I think the verse means thus or so. Or the question is asked, "What to you think this verse means?" Now there is a place for some of this, but too often a Bible Study can become little more than a pooling of ignorance. A group of people sharing what they don't know or understand about a particular passage and then it is left at that.

I recall some years ago, a community Bible Study program that was promoted and they ended up getting a fair number of people from various churches involved, as well as some unchurched folks. A couple I know shared with me how they were selected as one of the group leaders, and how they were shortly asked to step down from that role. What happened was exactly what MacArthur is referring to. When, after the introduction of a topic, folks moved into their small groups, individuals were asked to share their impressions and thoughts. As the various group members shared, it was clear that not so few of the ideas were way off base. So this couple, as group leaders, drew the attention of the group to what Scripture actually had to say. Well, that was not what they were to do. Any answer, no matter what, was to be considered appropriate and considered along with all the other answers as a valid answer. In other words, "the truth" bore no more weight in this Bible Study program than any far fetched idea that could be brought to the fore. It was a long way from what Paul saw among the Berea Christians where they examined everything they heard *in light of Scripture* to see what was in fact, true (Acts 17:11, see also 1 John 4:1-3).

And then a third thing to avoid if Scripture is to be rightly handled is, we must not spiritualize. MacArthur

mentions the first sermon he ever preached. The text was, "And the angel rolled the stone away." The title of his sermon was, "Rolling Away Stones in Your Life." He shares how he eloquently spoke of the stone of doubt, and the stone of fear, and the stone of anger. Notice, his sermon fit the pattern of what many consider should be that of a good sermon. He had three well defined points. And what he spoke of, was well worth consideration. But the problem was, his sermon had absolutely nothing to do with the text. What he articulated so well, was not what the verse was talking about. The verse of his text was talking about a real stone. What he had done was to make the stone an allegory.

You can do a lot with Scripture if you want to spiritualize. MacArthur shares an incident when a fellow came to one of his associates for marriage counseling. The counselor asked the fellow why he ever got married in the first place because, as he had discovered, the fellow and his wife were so different, so far apart. Well the fellow said, it was because of a sermon his pastor had preached. "A sermon on what? On the walls of Jericho." "What do the walls of Jericho have to do with marriage?" Well, as this fellow explained it, there was a spiritual principle there. "You march around something, claim it for God. March around seven times and the walls will fall down. You find a girl you want, march around her seven times, and the walls of her heart will fall down. Marry her." The counselor didn't believe what he was hearing so he asked the fellow who the preacher was. He was given the preacher's phone number and called the preacher up ask about it. "Yes, the preacher said, I preached that sermon, and I have gotten a lot of other good sermons out of that same text."

Well, that kind of sermonizing, and that approach to Bible Study as

well, may be somewhat easy... because you don't need a Bible. You can use anything and come up with something. Whereas, Biblical preaching and legitimate Bible Study is work... it is hard, time consuming, work. And, I might add, legitimate private devotional time is also work. "Blessed is the man [whose] delight is in the law of the Lord, And on His law [on God's precepts and teachings] he [habitually] meditates day and night" (Psalm 1:1,2 AMP).

In this connection, I have mentioned it to our pastor here, and I don't mean it only for the congregation here, but we as pastors and church leaders really need to encourage church members in this thing of a serious delving into the Word. And there is little question but that "a delving in," that "a right handling" means more than a cursory reading of the words of the Bible. And I really believe it involves more, at least it involves more for those who have been in the church for some time, than a use of most of the devotional material that is so readily available today. And this would often include more than some of the devotional material put out by the various church bodies. Clearly no one of us can claim to be able, on our own, to get at the full meaning and implications of Scripture. And even if the best of tools are at hand for the study, not everyone has the 'know-how' for the best use of those tools. In light of these things, I would really like to see a couple sets of devotional commentaries on hand at the church. One such commentary would be the *People's Bible Commentary*, published by Northwestern Publishing (WELS), so people could check out one of the volumes and use it in their daily devotional time. When they are done with one volume, they can return it and check out another, and in this way gain much insight as words, connections to other passages of Scripture, history, geography, and many other things

are explained, and Scripture really comes alive and relevant to the reader.

But even with the learning and gaining of insight, and coming more and more to hold firmly to the Scripture and the truth of Scripture, there is finally, one more and very important thing I would like to lift up. When it comes to our holding to the truth as individual believers as well as corporately (as a church), it is of utmost importance that our hearts be established with grace. If we [the church] are going to be faithful and effective in this world, not only as pillars and foundations, but also as bearers of the Truth, then we need to do so *with hearts that are filled and overflowing with the love of God*. If it is only an intellectual thing with us, then the consequence is going to be bigotry, and pride, and narrow-mindedness. On the other hand, if our holding to the truth has connection to our hearts, then and only then, will what we are about, be accompanied with love, with kindness, and with good-will to all people.

Think of our Lord, in this regard, and His dealing with people who had so much trouble with believing and accepting the truth. Think of how He dealt with His disciples on so many occasions, or with those who were ready to condemn the woman they had caught in the act of adultery, or the woman at the well, and yes, even so often with the religious leaders of His time. And what do we see? We see the Truth accompanied with love, with kindness, with patience, while at the same time, we never see the Truth being compromised.

God grant that as individuals, and as members of the body of Christ, "the Church" in this time and in the place in which we find ourselves... we might be found faithful in our God given calling, to be pillars and buttresses, and propagators, of the truth. To the glory of God and the furtherance of His kingdom. Amen.

Preaching The Gospel In Today's Society

by Russell Grigg, M.Sc. (Hons)

Today's society seems to be becoming more and more impervious to the Gospel. So how can we present the Gospel to maximum effect? The book of Acts provides an answer.

It is reasonable for us to consider the book of Acts as having two main purposes that benefit us today. These are:

1. For our **edification** as Christians, as we are given an account of the formation of the early Church and related events.
2. For our **example** as preachers, Christian workers, and missionaries, as we are shown the way in which the Apostles went about the task of obeying the Great Commission.

If we examine Acts in this light - as our example of how we should go about preaching the Gospel in a cross-cultural situation or in our own culture (which is becoming more and more multi-cultural) - we see some surprising things.

The love of God

First, the love of God is not mentioned by any preacher in Acts in any sermon. In fact, as a concordance will show, the word 'love' does not occur even once in the book of Acts in any context. Instead, Paul and the other preachers reiterate the themes of the death and resurrection of Jesus, God's judgment, and the need for personal repentance and belief in Christ. Paul's expositions on the love of God, including the great theme in Romans 5:8 that God loved us while we were still sinners, were all written to Christians, and were not, it seems, preached to non-Christians.

This does not mean, however, that God's love cannot be seen in



Mars Hill, as it appears today, where Paul stood and reasoned with the philosophers of Athens.

action in Acts. Saul's (Paul's) conversion, recounted three times for us in Acts (Acts 9:1-20, 22:1-16, 26:9-18), is attributed by Paul in his letter to Timothy as being due to the grace, love, mercy, and longsuffering of God, and Paul says that his conversion was 'a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on Him' (I Timothy 1:12-16). In Romans 2:4, Paul says that it is the goodness of God that leads to repentance, and the term 'goodness' here encompasses not only God's holiness, righteousness and truth, but also His love, benevolence, mercy and grace.

Two starting points

The second surprising thing about the way Paul preached the Gospel, as recorded in Acts, is that he had two entirely different starting points, depending on his audience.

1. When Paul preached to the Jews, he 'reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead'. The focal point of his message was 'this Jesus whom I preach unto you

- is Christ' [i.e. the Messiah] (Acts 17:2-3).
2. When Paul preached to the Gentiles, for example the Lycaonians (Acts 14:6, 15) and the Greeks (Acts 17:22-31), he began with Creation and God's role as Creator, and he appealed to what can be seen in nature as the evidence for this.

Why the difference between Paul's approach to the Jews and his approach to the non-Jews? The reason is the key to our understanding of why preaching about the lost state of man, or even about the cross, often has little impact in society today, whether in the West or in missionary situations.

Judaism had a creation basis - Genesis. From the Old Testament Scriptures the Jews believed in the one true God and knew Him as Creator, Lawgiver, and Judge. The Jews already knew and believed the scriptural record of Creation and the Fall: they knew about sin and that the penalty for sin is death. They needed only to be shown from the Scriptures and from the Resurrection that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

Greeks ... Evolutionists

On the other hand, the Gentiles, and the Greeks in particular, were evolutionary in their thinking. Professor Fairfield Osborn, of Columbia University and the American Museum of Natural History, has said that Empedocles, who lived in the fifth Century BC, 'may justly be called the father of the evolution idea'. Aristotle, 384-322 BC, in his Physics, 'refers to Empedocles as having first shown the possibility of the origin of the fittest forms of life through chance rather than through Design'. And Aristotle himself 'taught that there was a continuous gradation of living forms from the lowest to the highest, culminating

in man, and that this evolutionary sequence came about through an internal perfecting tendency.'

When Paul was on Mars Hill, he was dealing with 'certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoics' (Acts 17:18). The Epicureans followed Epicurus (342-270 BC), who denied that there was any purposive form in nature and taught that everything on the earth had evolved directly from the earth material itself. It is not surprising then that the Epicureans believed that pleasure, and particularly sensuous pleasure, was the chief good of existence. The Stoics, on the other hand, stressed a simple life-style, but were completely pantheistic. Thus Greek society was both evolutionary in its thinking and idolatrous in its practice.

These Gentiles did not have the Jewish Scriptures. Paul therefore had to reach them in terms of something they did have - the foundational knowledge of God as Creator, almost obliterated by their philosophies and idolatries, but still there and witnessed to by nature and their consciences (Romans 1:20, 2:15). And so, in his address to the men on Mars Hill (Acts 17:22-31), Paul began with the power of God in creation, and moved on to the goodness of God in His providence. He then spoke against their idols, and he urged them to repent in view of the fact that God was ruler and judge and there was a coming day of judgment. It was only after this that he mentioned the Resurrection. Presumably, if he had not been interrupted, he would have gone on to say that this Resurrection occurred after Christ's death on the cross, and he would have expounded God's grace in the provision of a risen Saviour. But note the order in which Paul developed his argu-



An altar from Rome with the Latin inscription "To unknown God", which could have been similar to the Greek one in Athens seen by Paul.

ment.

Did Paul fail?

Some expositors say that Paul failed in his approach at Athens, because he did not found a church there. But there were at least six converts from his sermon on Mars Hill and maybe several more, as we read, 'Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among them⁶ which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them' (Acts 17:34). In due course a church was begun at Athens, and the conversion of Dionysius, who was a member of the Areopagus or Supreme Court, was so genuine that he became the leader of it. Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, refers to Dionysius as 'the first Bishop of the Church of Athens'. Hardly a failure on Paul's part, or, for that matter, on the part of the Holy Spirit!

The world today

Today the world is very much like that of the Greeks of Paul's day. In the West, evolution is the predominant belief system and, as a result of this denial of the one true God and rejection of His rules for holy living, the epicurean ideal of hedonism (pleasure seeking) has become the predominant lifestyle.

At the same time many people are turning to the Hindu philosophies of the New Age movement or to the occult to fill the spiritual vacuum in their lives caused by their own atheism.

Similarly, most of the countries in which missionary societies work have religions which deny the existence of one holy transcendent Creator and are evolutionary in their beliefs about origins; for example they begin with a belief in pre-existing matter or creatures of some kind. These religions usually involve the placating of evil spirits, or the earning of merit by worship, as in Buddhism, Shintoism, Hinduism, animism, etc., as the Greeks did.

The lesson for preachers and Christian missionaries is clear. God has given us in the book of Acts a pattern of a way to effectively reach people today, which we can follow in our own preaching. Demonstrated to us is the way in which the Apostle Paul adapted his approach and adjusted his method of preaching to best suit the culture of his hearers, both Jews and Gentiles - to begin where they were at. We also see the way in which he used creation evangelism to best penetrate the thinking of the Greeks. Creation evangelism is a tool which works. Our society today, in its evolutionary thinking, ignorance of the one true living God, and preoccupation with sex, is much more like that of the Greeks than that of the Jews. Preachers today can therefore follow this pattern to their own advantage and the advantage of their hearers.

This article and references and footnotes for this article may be found online at - <https://creation.com/preaching-the-gospel-in-todays-society>

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The LMS-USA is Lutheran Church body describing itself as *Biblical, Confessional, Evangelical, Liturgical and Congregational*. It is a 'Forum' in which there is an on going discussion of theological issues and concerns among clergy and lay alike. The LMS-USA meets annually for a Theological Conference and this publication, besides carrying news of the Ministerium and Synod, functions also as a vehicle for this continuing dialogue.

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