

# **PAUL AND THE CORINTHIANS: A RESPONSE TO DEAN FLEMMING, "PAUL AND THE ATHENIANS: ARTICULATING THE GOSPEL IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD"**

**Kent Brower**

**Nazarene Theological College, Manchester**

In his recent commentary on 1 Corinthians, Anthony Thiselton, Professor of Theology at the University of Nottingham observes that the Corinth of Paul's day provides "an embarrassingly close model of a postmodern context for our gospel in our own times."<sup>1</sup> For Thiselton, this correspondence extends even beyond the "multicultural and religiously diverse" Roman Empire to which Flemming draws attention in his paper on Paul and the Athenians. It points to the socio-economic forces that drive Corinthian culture—the celebration of wealth, the pursuit of status, the enjoyment of hedonistic life-styles, the affirmation of ubiquitous religiosity and diversity.

Acts 17 has long been considered the best example of gospel proclamation in a hostile environment. Flemming thinks it is the "outstanding example of intercultural witness to a pagan audience in the New Testament." His re-examination draws attention to important signposts along this well-worn path, not least in his careful attention to nuances that resonate particularly well with what he calls "classic emphases of Wesleyan theology." This analysis suggests, to Flemming, that Acts 17 "holds some intriguing parallels to ministry within a pluralistic, postmodern setting."

Although Athens figures only incidentally in Paul's epistles, scholars increasingly point to the important role this city plays in Luke's scheme. Luke ends Acts with Paul in Rome, the political and military centre of the Roman Empire. But Luke is also concerned to show that the gospel penetrates to the heart of the intellectual as well as political "ends of the earth" (see Acts 1:8).<sup>2</sup> Even during the period of the Roman Empire, Athens remains "the very heartland of urban pagan culture."

According to Acts, Paul engages with precisely this intellectual tradition; he argues his case in the Areopagus before the power-brokers and religious authorities of Athenian society. Because Paul is addressing a culture with no knowledge of the Christian story, he must establish credibility with his listeners. He does so by "a respectful and somewhat conciliatory approach to his hearers' pagan religious life" and in doing so uncovers the underlying religious need of his audience. Luke's summary of Paul's speech shows a polished and skilful bridge-building exercise. According to Flemming, Paul "recognizes there is something genuine in their religious aspirations and felt needs, and he uses them as steppingstones for communicating the gospel," although he is clear that the direction of their search through idols is ignorant as well as wrong-headed. In this speech, Luke shows Paul addressing the council with rhetorical skill and sensitivity. Flemming argues that Paul uses the language of his conversation partners "without sanctioning the belief system to which they originally belong." This is "both constructive and corrective engagement," combining ideas that are authentic to biblical faith but couching them in the language of "familiar Stoic themes and terms."

From that basis, Paul begins to unpack the gospel message. He centres on God's character, revelation in nature and relationship to humanity. Paul maintains a fine balance here by explaining the message in intelligible categories without compromising its very character. But, Flemming argues, an identificational approach can only go so far. Paul also wishes to confront and correct. He does so "by positively confessing the God of the Scriptures." He challenges both the Stoic and Epicurean understanding of God. Paul's Jewish abhorrence of Gentile idolatry, shown so clearly in Romans, is seen here in what Flemming calls "a crushing case against Athenian idolatry." This is not done from a strictly Jewish perspective, however. Instead, he "uses convergences between Jewish, Christian, and Greek ideas" in order to challenge pagan polytheism, not least the Athenians' laissez-faire tolerance of the plethora of religions. By doing so, he "uses the philosophical language of his audience...in order to transform their worldview." Flemming tellingly notes Luke's "deep conviction that the pagan world is capable of being redeemed," a thought that informs an authentically Wesleyan understanding of mission. The climax of Paul's speech directs his audience to Jesus. But Paul does not offer them another religion to set alongside their current belief system. Nor does he imply that every path leads to God. "The understanding of salvation at work here is not simply a matter of purifying and redirecting the pagans' natural knowledge of God. What they need is not education, but transformation."

Even in the best possible light, Luke cannot gloss over the dissonance between the worldview of the Athenians and that of the gospel. The modest response to the message is well-known. But we know very little about the long-term impact of the gospel upon Athens.<sup>3</sup> A church does exist in Athens by the end of the first century but we have very little reliable information about it. Eusebius refers to a letter written to the Athenians in the latter part of the 2nd century by Dionysius, bishop of Corinth.<sup>4</sup> We also know that Athens remains stubbornly hostile to Christianity until the pagan academy is closed by Justinian in 529. Nevertheless, Flemming believes that Luke regards the Areopagus speech as a model of missionary preaching to an educated pagan audience. Indeed, he thinks that this model of the careful contextualisation of both message and methods may be apropos to pluralistic, post-modern and post-Christian Europe. He offers a range of lessons to be learned from Acts. I can only comment on a few of them before turning to some concluding observations.

Flemming's first point is a reminder that we must listen to the context and the culture. Europe offers a far more diverse range of cultures and sub-cultures than could ever have been imagined by Luke. But the same principle applies. If we are to have conversation partners in our contexts, we must have respect for them. And we need to gain their respect.

But we should not underestimate the difficulty. In Athens, Paul is introducing a new religion. In Europe, Christianity has a history. And this is probably the greatest challenge to Flemming's discussion. The dominant Western European response to Christianity amongst the intelligentsia is, at best, jaded and, at worst, disdainful and abusive.<sup>5</sup> Nor is the post-Christian character of Western Europe confined to the "chattering classes." It permeates all strata of society. We see a resurgence of old pre-Christian pagan religions, sometimes linked with an ecological sensitivity to the environment that is deeply suspicious of anything Christian. For them, Christianity is associated with rapacious exploitation and disregard for the environment. Coupled with this is the growth in the non-Christian population in Europe precisely at a time when Islam feels itself to be embattled and when the 'war on terror' is easily interpreted as a Christian attack upon other religions.

In our time and place, there are many misperceptions to be overcome. Frequently we have only ourselves to blame for this. No one here needs to be reminded that the history of western European Christianity is riddled with failure and sin. The accusations do not make pleasant listening: bigotry, sexism and racism still bedevil large sections of the church, genocide and nationalism are still part of living memory. Rampant capitalism cloaked in Christian garb and a missionary movement hijacked by those whose goal was crass imperialism – each word or phrase is a poignant reminder of failure. Christians have often been thought to obstruct justice rather than insisting upon it. Signs that we have learned our lessons are few. Grave questions can be raised about the inexorable rise in militarism, for example, a problem not helped by the fact that a major European leader who took his nation to war in Iraq over ‘weapons of mass destruction’ is a practising Christian. All too often Christianity has been identified with deeply-flawed action by so-called Christian nations. To make matters worse, the triumph of English Deism in the popular mind means that most western Europeans have, at best, a vague understanding of God. This non-biblical picture of God leads to the absence of God and the irrelevance of Christian faith. We really do need to listen to the concerns of our culture in ways that we have singularly failed to do but we may not find what we hear particularly enjoyable. Flemming’s Paul in Athens does not contend with this legacy. But we do and we need to own it in humility. And when we speak, we must speak with respect and love, even when we must still disagree.

That is not to say that signs of Christian hope are missing. Phrases like ‘good Samaritan’ and ‘prodigal son’ have entered English vocabulary. Many public holidays, especially in Continental Europe, have Christian origins even if they have long been stripped of religious significance. But to suggest that western European is “Christian” in anything but an historical sense must stretch the definition of Christian almost to breaking point. Flemming reminds us that we cannot assume that Europeans today understand the biblical story. Perhaps so, but often I suspect people in Europe have just enough Christian knowledge to be inoculated against catching the real thing. The question is, where do we go from here?

At this point, I think Flemming offers some of his best insights. He suggests that we may need to return to the notion of “our shared creaturehood as people made in the image of God.” This seems to me to be not only crucial but particularly congenial to Wesleyan theology. Our theologians are rediscovering the fundamental importance of the Trinity in Christian discourse. This doctrine is far from the arcane and abstruse ivory tower debate of caricature. It is the central ingredient in the good news of the gospel, the ground for all mission and gives coherence to all God’s redemptive purposes. If we understand God as triune ‘Being-in-Communion’ and humankind, created in the image of God, as beings-in-communion, we are in a place to make a start on ‘pre-evangelism.’ An awareness of our creatureliness and that we are created as beings built for relationship addresses the deepest needs of people across cultures. The bankrupt heritage of an individualistic Enlightenment, demonstrated in the widespread ennui within the dominant post-war European culture, offers us a surprising opportunity. The convergence of post-modern rejection of this individualism and the Christian understanding of the human condition expressed in self-centred autonomy before God and neighbour is an opportunity to remind our alienated and disenchanting generation that the gospel proclaims and offers restored relationships with the Creator and within creation itself.

The gospel is indeed good news for a society dominated by hate and suspicion, fearful of neighbours and at war with enemies. Even on a personal level where the frantic pursuit of happiness through hedonistic life-style or the acquisition of more things leads to

dysfunctional families and discordant lives, the gospel offers good news of wholeness and new creation. Wesleyan theology with its concern for restored relationships and holiness of life seen in love of God and neighbour speaks volumes into this context. Stories of despair are re-written as resurrection stories under the redeeming power of the gospel.

This links with Flemming's assertion that a narrative approach to theology is particularly suited to our postmodern context. But Flemming pointedly reminds us that "the story we tell is not simply one choice at a smorgasbord of competing narratives. It is the defining story." Tolerance and openness to the stories of others is a Christian and a postmodern virtue. But Christians insist that there is only one metanarrative within which our stories gain meaning rather than an infinitive number of narratives, or, indeed, metanarratives. Postmodernism seems to have a suspicion of anyone or any group which makes truth claims This will continue to be a sticking point between Christian faith and post-modernity. But it remains a non-negotiable. The Christian message dissolves into incoherence without the Pauline insistence that there is one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in all.

Aspects of the biblical story have, of course, been domesticated in Western European culture and, in the process, secularised almost beyond recognition. The welfare state, epitomised by the national health services of European states, is an unspoken and mostly unacknowledged legacy of the best of European Christianity, not least in its Methodist form. As Flemming reminds us, it is striking that although Paul is distressed about the idolatry of Athens, he refuses to flatly condemn the pagans or their religious and philosophical systems. Instead, he recognises that the Athenians, their past, even their religious yearnings, have been touched by the grace of God. Realising that God's prevenient grace is at work among people of other faiths and worldviews, drawing them to himself, will keep us from treating them as adversaries to be "conquered." It will encourage us to look for where God is already at work, to recognise 'signs of grace' wherever they are found, but not only, I suggest, in the grace-enabled human search for God, but in the goodness exhibited by so many who populate our post-Christian countries. The overwhelming outpouring of generosity following the December 26, 2004, Tsunami is a prime example of the God's grace at work even where it is not acknowledged as such.

At the same time, we must never lose our prophetic voice within our contexts. Flemming notes that "the gospel is in some ways counter-cultural to every culture [and therefore] we must critically engage a pluralistic world, while at the same time offering that world an alternative vision of reality." This picture emerges from Acts 17 where the challenge is an intellectual conflict over the resurrection. Flemming is quite right to limit his comments to the conflict over the resurrection as far as Acts 17 is concerned. But here the wider picture of Paul's engagement with culture takes us much further than Acts 17 allows. In Paul's view, the problem is more than simply a matter of perception. Human sinfulness has its own consequence in perverting and damaging all relationships.

If we interrogate Paul himself concerning the intersection of Christ and culture, we discover that Paul thinks the gospel is counter-cultural in all contexts. If Thiselton is right to note the uncanny parallels between Corinth and post-modern Europe, Paul's Corinthian correspondence adds further nuances to Flemming's principles. As far as Paul is concerned, the challenge to culture cannot be restricted to private or personal morality. The gospel challenges the unrighteous sinful societal structures wherever they are organised in ways that are overtly or subtly against the good news. In Corinth, Paul resists the way the

Corinthian society is organised with its values on wealth, property, possessions, rhetoric and patronage. He does not do this by setting up pickets in the agora nor by withdrawing from society. Rather, he insists that the Corinthian Christian community is a new people, an alternative society, God's counter-cultural people in the midst of their culture. The Christian community must never take its shape from the selfish forms of this passing age. In Corinth, the whole honour-patronage system that determined master-slave relationships, husband-wife rights, sexual mores, privilege and power—all of these are transformed by the gospel within the community of faith. Their lives together must now be shaped by following the crucified one. In Paul's view, the good news must always be proclaimed in our communal life together—in word, deed and sacrament. Any failure to do so is a matter for corporate and personal repentance and renewal.

Personal ethical living can never be divorced from our communal life, of course. On the personal level, Paul makes it clear that the Corinthian Christians are indeed the holy people of God, new creatures in Christ. But individual lives must reflect that reality at the inner core of their being as well as the most intimate of relationships. People are also transformed by the grace of God. This always challenges the self-centred values of their pagan culture and of ours. No longer are wealth, public performance, ostentatious life-style, hedonistic feasting, drinking and sexual promiscuity to be part of the Christian fellowship. This kind of sinful behaviour is damaging to the people of God and is part of a soon-to-be-over age.

When set out in this fashion, there is, after all, an uncanny similarity between Athens and Madrid, between Corinth and Manchester. Post-Christian Europe resembles the pagan Greco-Roman society in a variety of ways. The challenges are similar; the task is as daunting. But the good news of the gospel is as relevant for Munich and Moscow as it was for Athens and Corinth. Fleming has drawn out lessons to be learned. Our task is to build bridges, challenge culture and proclaim the hope of the resurrection to an alienated continent. We are to do this in word and sacrament. But we are also called to proclaim the good news in our lives, individually and corporately. Our challenge is to proclaim the crucified and risen Christ in our lives as the people of God, as well as in our words.

Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> A C Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. NIGTC (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 17.

<sup>2</sup> It is also conceivable, as Flemming argues following Walter Hansen (see Flemming, note 3), that Luke alludes to the traditions of philosophical debate in Athens. But even if that case cannot be proven, Luke emphasises the proclamation of the good news at the intellectual centre.

<sup>3</sup> Quadratus, an early Christian Apologist, is said to have responded to Hadrian's visit to Athens to participate in the Eleusian mysteries during AD 125-26 but this is uncertain.

<sup>4</sup> Eusebius, *HE* IV, xxiii (in Loeb Classical Library), 379, refers to a letter from Dionysius, bishop of Corinth, to Athens which is "a call to faith and to life according to the gospel, and for despising this he rebukes them as all but apostates from the truth since the martyrdom of Publius, their leader, in the persecution of that time. He mentions that Quadratus was appointed their bishop after the martyrdom of Publius and testifies that through his zeal they had been brought together and received a revival of their faith. Moreover, He mentions that Dionysius the Areopagite, was converted by the Apostle Paul to the faith, according to the narrative in the Acts, and was the first to be appointed to the bishopric of the diocese of Athens".

<sup>5</sup> One BBC commentator described this as "patrician disdain" (BBC, Radio Four, 21/03/05).

**PAUL AND THE CORINTHIANS: A RESPONSE TO DEAN FLEMMING, "PAUL AND THE  
ATHENIANS: ARTICULATING THE GOSPEL IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD"  
BY KENT BROWER**