

D. THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD AND AUTHENTIC EVANGELISM

It is probably in the realm of Christian evangelism that presumption concerning the character of God is most prevalent. The amount of printed material available that proposes either to declare the gospel of the grace of God or explain how this saving message ought to be communicated is vast indeed. The attempts to employ novelty, relevance, artful persuasion, and attention-getting media seem to be endless. Yet concerning this huge literary and communications deposit, you will search with more success seeking for that proverbial "needle in a haystack" than the discovery here of a substantial and distinguishing explanation of the nature of the only true and living God. In this regard He is the great presumption. Yet how beguiling, even seductive, this approach so often proves to be. When we enthusiastically commend our prospective life partner to friends, how very careful we are to give a detailed description of that person's attractive characteristics, their virtues and distinctive strengths. Yet when we desire to commend the greatness of God's gospel to an enquiring sinner, we usually assume that the person we are witnessing to has a sufficient understanding of the Almighty. But how fatal such a supposition can be, for while a person may confess their belief in "god," and the person who is witnessing takes this confession to mean "God," the possibility of meaningful communication, based upon agreement of meaning, becomes an impossibility, that is until both are talking about the same "God." And the only way there can be agreement here is when the person witnessing makes clear the distinguishing marks of "God." The looseness, indeed irreverent use of the name of "God" today, makes such clarification all the more important.

Hence, to truly know the God of the Bible is to be under constraint to tell of His glorious and unique being. We can learn from Moses in this regard. ¹ Give ear, O heavens, and let me speak; and let the earth hear the words of my mouth. ² Let my teaching drop as the rain, My speech distill as the dew, as the droplets on the fresh grass and as the showers on the herb. ³ For I proclaim the name of the LORD; ascribe greatness to our God! ⁴ The Rock! His work is perfect, for all His ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He" (Deut. 32:1-4). Or consider Paul's lofty declaration. "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen" (I Tim. 1:17; cf. Acts 28:30-31; Rom. 1:15-16). At its heart, the Christian gospel is concerned with what God is like with respect to man as an inveterate sinner. On the one hand, unrighteous man learns that God is absolutely righteous in his being and demands (Ezra 9:15), while on the other hand man in his consequent guilt learns that God justifies and pardons the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). The great question then is not how a man might be reconciled to himself or a neighbor, but how he might be reconciled to God (Job 4:17; 9:2; 25:4; II Cor. 5:20). This is the supreme issue of life today that is increasingly hid from view because of the obscurity that man-centered, relational theology injects. It is true that an unbeliever may have a basic and biblical understanding of the God of the Bible. But today, it is becoming less likely that such a perspective is to be expected, especially that which engenders awe and reverence. Hence, the proclamation of the gospel must involve a telling of godless humanity of what God is like. Without this essential content,

evangelism degenerates into sentimental abstraction at a horizontal human level, or evangelism that describes a god other than He who is alone revealed in the Bible. Sad to say, it is to this point that modern evangelism has fallen. Tozer writes in this respect:

The gospel can lift this destroying burden [of obligation to God] from the mind, give beauty for ashes, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. But unless the weight of the burden is felt the gospel can mean nothing to the man; and until he does see a vision of God high and lifted up, there will be no woe and no burden. Low views of God destroy the gospel for all who hold them.⁴¹

1. Evangelism starts with the God of the Bible.

Of course the gospel means “good news” or “glad tidings,” and Scripture makes it quite plain that this wonderful message is sourced in God. It is indeed “the gospel of God,” or more specifically, (a) the gospel “belonging to God,” (b) the gospel “about God,” (c) the gospel “sourced in God,” and (d) the gospel “sent by God” (Rom. 1:1; cf. 15:16; Mark 1:14; II Cor. 11:7; I Thess. 2:2, 8, 9; I Tim. 1:11). What exactly is the gospel? Why then the gospel? For what purpose was the gospel ordained? What is the prime saving work that the gospel accomplishes? Any answers to these questions that do not focus upon the fundamental necessity of reconciliation between God and man are grossly inadequate. Hence the Christian gospel commences with God, and that God is uncompromisingly the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and no other, the God of the prophets, the only God of Israel, the God of the Gentiles, the only true and living God of the Bible. Consequently any proclamation of this good news from God demands that, in a pluralistic society, the character of this God be distinctively and emphatically made plain. This means that to proclaim God’s gospel as the Bible declares it to be, at the same time is to declare that gospel’s God. To make this point even clearer, let us consider four passages of New Testament Scripture that focus on God’s gospel *and* that gospel’s God.

a. John 3:16.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16). In our familiarity with certain parts of the Bible, we often overlook vital truth and this is certainly the case with this passage, which is so frequently used in the proclamation of the gospel. The subject of this sentence is “the God” (ὁ θεός, *ho theos*), and everything else is subordinated to this glorious fact. The definite article here distinguishes the God of Abraham from all other gods.⁴² Thus for the Apostle John, he specifically calls attention to the only God of Israel, and none

⁴¹ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, p. 11.

⁴² Where ὁ θεός, *ho theos* is used, “the [definite] article appears when the specific Jewish or Christian God or Lord is meant.” Blass, Debrunner, ed. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, p. 133.

other; only *this* God sent forth His Son to save sinners from perishing. A study of John's writings only confirms this emphasis. Robert Cook has given us an excellent study of the doctrine of God in this regard.⁴³ In summary he declares:

- (1) John teaches that "God is spirit [πνεῦμα, pneuma]" (John 4:24; cf. 1:18; I John 4:12). That is, God is spiritual in His nature. "This is an affirmation that God is transcendent, pure person (in contrast to one who is a compound of matter and spirit or that which is only matter and therefore finite). He is unlimited by space and time and must be understood in spiritual terms. Therefore we must worship Him personally (in spirit) and on the basis of truth."⁴⁴
- (2) John teaches that "God is light [φῶς, phōs]" (I John 1:5). "[The context strongly supports the view that I John 1:5 is an affirmation of God's holiness. . . . Fellowship is predicated upon a God who is light sharing common things with children who are walking in light. Since it is sin that mars and destroys this fellowship, the light that makes fellowship possible must be construed as the absence of sin (light is the absence of darkness [I John 1:5b]). God's holiness represents among other things His absolute moral perfection. He is totally separated from sin in His essential being. Figuratively speaking, the outstanding quality of light is its purity. This is especially apt here since light is used to picture a moral quality and the appropriate ethical relationship of man vis-a-vis God (I John 1:7)."⁴⁵
- (3) John teaches that "God is love [ἀγάπη, agapē]" (I John 4:8; 16). "God is loving, but John's aim here is to distinguish the activity of love from the attribute of love. The latter is the source from which the former arises. Love in God is that which moves Him to self-communication both within and outside the Godhead. Thus the affirmation that He is love asserts that God is, by nature, One who is wont to share Himself with others, especially His children."⁴⁶
- (4) John teaches that God "the Father has life in Himself" (John 5:26). "This sets forth His aseity, or selfexistence. It sets him apart from every other being, all of whom are dependent in that they have life from a source outside themselves (a concept also implied in the Creator-creature relationship (Rev. 4:11))."⁴⁷

⁴³ W. Robert Cook, *The Theology of John*, pp. 40-5.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

- (5) John teaches that God is, by nature, true (John 17:3; I John 5:20; cf. John 3:33; 8:40). "The term used here is ἀληθινός, *alēthinos*, meaning true in the sense of 'real' or 'genuine.' The God of Scripture, about whom John writes, is neither false nor counterfeit nor the figment of some man's or society's imagination. This God conforms to reality intrinsically; in fact He is the source and standard for all that is genuine and real."⁴⁸
- (6) John teaches that God is personal, but especially the Father in relation to His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, "the only begotten from the Father" (John 1:14; cf. 1:18; 3:16; I John 4:9). This Son, "is the manifestation, or revealer, of the Father. Although the Father is invisible to human perception, the Son has 'explained' the meaning of the Father for men (John 1:18."⁴⁹ Further, this God is also the believer's Father (John 1:12-13; 3:1-8; I John).
- (7) Consequently, when we declare to an unbelieving world that, "God so loved the world," in this pluralist world we must include in our gospel message something of the distinguishing character of this only true and living God of Abraham.

b. Romans 3:23-24.

²³ For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23-24). While it may sound like a contradiction in terms, yet the gospel is often presented in a way that is unbiblical in its sole christocentric emphasis. By this is meant the focus upon the Lord Jesus Christ as the beginning and end of the gospel; and again, notwithstanding Revelation 1:8; 21:6; 22:13; but cf. 1:6; 22:18, such an idea is quite inadequate. Now while this matter will inevitably lead us into a consideration of trinitarian relations, yet it ought to be said that the gospel begins and finishes with God, and more specifically God the Father, and this is no mere fine theological distinction. While John 3:16 has made this matter quite clear, so also does Romans 3:23-24 as it nestles in the middle of the most concise and yet comprehensive gospel passage in all of the Bible, that is Romans 3:21-26. In fact, with the inclusion of personal pronouns, "God the Father" is spoken of eight times within these six verses.

- (1) The gospel is predicated upon the universal sinful condition of man, both Jew and gentile, as described in v. 23. Such thorough pollution is defined according to the holiness of God. "All," that is the whole human race, has plummeted into the darkness having veered from its original course of

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 42-3.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 44.

attaining unto the bulls-eye of “the glory of God.” This verse merely summarizes that hopeless condition of sinful man so comprehensively described in vs. 9-20.

- (2) Free justification, or full and righteous acquittal through faith in Christ’s atonement, is sourced in “His grace,” to the total exclusion of human merit. The pronoun “His” here must, in context, refer to God the Father in v. 23. Hence, it is God the Father who is moved by infinite mercy to reach down to man in his hopeless predicament. In other words, it is God the Father who is the prime mover in the establishing of the gospel, even as Romans 1:1,8-9, 16-17 uphold.
- (3) Therefore, in true biblical evangelism there must be a clear declaration about the character of this God and His demands upon man. Such characteristics are disarmingly presented in the preceding teaching of Romans 1:18-3:20, as the following categories indicate.
 - (a) *God is angry, wrathful.* “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,” (1:18; cf. 2:5; 3:5).
 - (b) *God is invisible.* “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.” (1:20).
 - (c) *God is eternal in power.* “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse” (1:20).
 - (d) *God is divine in nature.* “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse” (1:20).
 - (e) *God is glorious.* “[Ungodly man] exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures” (1:23).
 - (f) *God is incorruptible.* “[Ungodly man] exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures” (1:23).

- (g) *God is true.* "May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar." (3:4; cf. 1:25; 3:7).
- (h) *God is blessed forever.* "For they [ungodly men] exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen" (1:25).
- (i) *God is just and a judge.* "² And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. ³ But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God?" (2:2-3, cf. 1:32; 6, 11, 16).
- (j) *God is kind.* "Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" (2:4).
- (k) *God is forbearing, patient.* "Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" (2:4).
- (l) *God is faithful.* "³ What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? ⁴ May it never be!" (3:3-4).
- (m) *God is righteous.* "⁵ But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.) ⁶ May it never be!" (3:5-6).
- (4) By way of illustration, consider Romans 8:31 where Paul encourages the believer with the rhetorical question, "If God is for us, who is against us?" So J. I. Packer asks concerning this verse:

Who is [this] God? Paul speaks of the God of the Bible and of the gospel, the Lord Jehovah, "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6), the God whom "the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, hath declared" (John 1:18). This is the God who has spoken to announce His sovereignty: "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all My purpose'" Isa. 46:9 f., RSV). This is the God who showed His sovereignty by bringing Abraham out of Ur, Israel out of captivity in Egypt and later in Babylon, and Jesus out of the grave: and who shows the same sovereignty still every time He raises a sinner to spiritual life out of spiritual death. This is the God of Romans, the God whose

wrath “is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (1:18), yet who “commendeth His love towards us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (5:8). This is the God who calls, justifies and glorifies those whom from eternity He “predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son” (8:29). This is the God of the first Anglican [Church of England] article, the “one living and true God, everlasting . . . of infinite power, wisdom and goodness; the Maker and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible.”⁵⁰

c. II Corinthians 5:18-21.

¹⁸ Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, ¹⁹ namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (II Cor. 5:18-21). Here Paul exhorts those who have been reconciled to God, as a consequence, to be ministers of reconciliation. Including pronouns, God the Father is referred to nine times in these four verses; the name of Christ as mediator is mentioned six times. However, the dominant concern of Paul is that those reconciled to God the Father through Christ the Son should in turn exhort sinners to likewise be reconciled to God the Father through Christ the Son.

- (1) At the risk of being misunderstood, the point here is that evangelism is not simply about “being a disciple of Christ” or “coming to Christ” or “being a follower of Christ.” Rather, the purpose of becoming a Christian is that the sinner, as an enemy of God, might become a friend of God. The following list of references makes this point overwhelmingly clear (Matt. 5:16; John 13:31; 14:6, 13; 17:1, 4; I Cor. 15:24, 28; Rom. 15:5-6; 16:27; Phil. 2:5-11; I Pet. 3:18; 4:11; I John 2:1).
- (2) However, when Paul writes of being reconciled to God and commends Christians to this ministry of reconciliation, who is the “God” that the Christian is to proclaim? He uses the term “God” with the assumption that he is describing the exclusive God he defines in numerous places in II Corinthians. It should be noted that the following list of attributes indicates Paul’s integral use of these characteristics rather than a systematic listing.

⁵⁰ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 237.

- (a) *God is living.* "We had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead" (1:9; cf. 6:16).
- (b) *God is gracious.* "For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you" (1:12; 8:1).
- (c) *God is faithful.* "But as God is faithful, our word to you is not yes and no" (1:18).
- (d) *God is glorious.* "For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (4:6).
- (e) *God is righteous.* "He [God the Father] made Him [God the Son] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (5:21).
- (f) *God is powerful.* "For indeed He [Jesus Christ] was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, yet we will live with Him because of the power of God directed toward you" (13:4; cf. 6:7).
- (g) *God is love.* "Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you" (13:11, 14).

d. I Peter 3:18.

"For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit" (I Pet. 3:18). The great end of evangelism is, "to bring us to God." Selwyn describes this as "the be-all and end-all of religion."⁵¹ Manton comments that this reconciliation, "is not fully done till we live with him in heaven; this is the end of our faith (I Pet. 1:9); this is the prime benefit offered to us in the gospel, to which all others tend."⁵²

⁵¹ Edward Gordon Selwyn, *The First Epistle Of St. Peter*, p. 196.

⁵² Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, XII, p. 198.

- (1) Thus Jesus Christ's great saving design was "to bring us to God [the Father]," that is acceptance by Him, the enjoyment of His presence, the beholding and praise of His glory. But again, the question to ask in today's pluralistic society concerns the exact identification of the God who Peter speaks about. I Peter leaves no doubt in this regard.
 - (a) *God has foreknowledge.* "[Elect] according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure" (1:2).
 - (b) *God is merciful.* "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1:3; cf. 2:10).
 - (c) *God is powerful.* "Who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1:5; cf. 5:6).
 - (d) *God is holy.* "¹⁵ But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; ¹⁶ because it is written, 'YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY'" (1:15-16).
 - (e) *God is just.* "If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth" (1:17).
 - (f) *God is radiant.* "BUT YOU ARE A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (2:9).
 - (g) *God is omniscient.* "FOR THE EYES OF THE LORD ARE TOWARD THE RIGHTEOUS, AND HIS EARS ATTEND TO THEIR PRAYER, BUT THE FACE OF THE LORD IS AGAINST THOSE WHO DO EVIL" (3:12).
 - (h) *God is patient.* "Who [the spirits now in prison] once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water" (3:20).
 - (i) *God is gracious.* "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (4:10; cf. 5:10, 12).

- (j) *God is glorious.* “After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you” (5:10).
- (2) So Peter points us to needed course adjustment in ourselves concerning the desire to be faithful in evangelism. Like Paul, the character of God is dealt with integrally rather than systematically. That is, the person of the definitive God is woven into Peter’s writing, and likewise his preaching. To meet this man would be to conclude that, “there is so much of God about him; his passion is wholly God; everything in his life is grounded upon God.” And to agree with this priority is not only to be mentally exercised concerning the knowledge of God, but also moved in the soul and affections. A. W. Tozer writes of this dominant and pervasive emphasis as follows:

As the sailor locates his position on the sea by “shooting” the sun, so we may get our moral bearings by looking at God. We must begin with God. We are right when, and only when, we stand in a right position relative to God, and we are wrong so far and so long as we stand in any other position. . . . So let us begin with God. Back of all, above all, before all is God; first in sequential order, above in rank and station, exalted in dignity and honor. As the self-existent One He gave beings to all things, and all things exist out of Him and for Him. “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created” (Rev. 4:11).⁵³

In other words, true biblical evangelism starts with my own relationship with the triune God so that proclamation of the “good news” is reflective of my own encounter. Thus personal evangelism will be as full of God as is the evangelist.

2. Evangelism in Athens.

The arrival of the Apostle Paul in Athens during his second missionary journey is highly significant with regard to the proclamation of the character of God. “¹⁵ Now those who escorted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they left. ¹⁶ Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols” (Acts 17:15-16). While he had recently ministered in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea, especially to audiences with some exposure to Judaism, yet in witnessing at the Areopagus or Mars Hill, his preaching is particularly notable because it involves the first major gospel presentation to a gathering that is solidly pagan and lacks any substantial Jewish or Old Testament

⁵³ Tozer, *Pursuit Of God*, pp. 101-2.

background. Hence, the distinctive emphasis that is quite obvious in Paul's sermon here is a matter of the greatest importance insofar as evangelizing the ignorant pagan masses of this twentieth century.

a. The priority of God at Athens.

Notice that Paul's message in Acts 17:22-31 is remarkable in that Jesus Christ is proclaimed only in the concluding verse. In other words, in vs. 22-30 we find detailed exposition concerning the nature of the only true and living God. Specifically, God is described according to His numerous attributes as follows:

- (1) *God is the creator of all things.* He is "the God who made the world and all things in it," v. 24.
- (2) *God is sovereign over heaven and earth.* "He is Lord of heaven and earth", v. 24.
- (3) *God is transcendent, not confined.* He "does not dwell in temples made with hands," v. 24.
- (4) *God is independent, self-sufficient.* "He [is not] served by human hands, as though He needed anything," v. 25.
- (5) *God is benevolent, maintaining His creation.* "He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things," v. 25.
- (6) *God is wise in His ordering of creation.* "He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation," v. 26.
- (7) *God is immanent, not far from any of us.* "That they [mankind] would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us," v. 27.
- (8) *God is life-giving, hence living.* "For in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children,'" v. 28.
- (9) *God is immaterial, hence spiritual.* "Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man," v. 29.

- (10) *God is forbearing, patient.* "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent," v. 30.
- (11) *God is righteous and just.* "Because He [God the Father] has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man [God the Son] whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead," v. 31.
- (12) *God is omnipotent,* "Because He [God the Father] has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man [God the Son] whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.", v. 31.

b. The response at Athens.

Some have maintained that Paul's attempt to address the Athenian intelligentsia on their own philosophic level proved to be a failure, so that at Corinth he expressed deep regret and was entirely different in his approach (I Cor. 2:1-5). Representative of this opinion is James Strahan who fancifully speculates that Paul, "departed [Athens] with a crushing sense of failure. . . . All that he said to the philosophers of Athens was true, but ineffective."⁵⁴ But surely this hypothesis is to be roundly rejected, for Acts 17:34 describes the significant conversion of Dionysius as well as other members of the Areopagite audience. Further, Eusebius, the early church historian, records that this same Dionysius became the first bishop of the church at Athens.⁵⁵

c. The lesson of Athens for today.

While rejecting the proposal of Strahan, we believe that Paul knew exactly what he was doing at Athens and that he had no regrets. Certainly he did not explicitly denounce the Greek paganism that surrounded him, but he did politely describe the Athenians as ignorant idolaters, and exhort them to repent. However, when Paul stated, "What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23), he immediately delivered the only firm base upon which any person can repent, and that is a full-orbed understanding of the God of Abraham. It is not enough merely to speak to men of "God," presuming that they understand what you mean, especially today, since all we may be

⁵⁴ James Strahan, "Athens," James Hastings, ed., *Dictionary Of The Apostolic Church*, I, pp. 109-10. While Sir William Ramsay popularized this theory in 1895, he considerably modified his verdict eighteen years later. Refer to E. M. Blaiklock, *The Acts Of The Apostles*, p. 143.

⁵⁵ "Dionysius," F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary Of The Christian Church*, pp. 401-2.

verbalizing is, for the audience, to use Francis Schaeffer's term, a "contentless banner."⁵⁶

J. I. Packer comments concerning this same scene:

We must not be afraid to start with the basic facts about God the Creator. Revealed truth has a structure, and this is its foundation. When Paul preached to the pagan Athenians, he laid this foundation before going further. He had to, or else the point of his witness to our Lord would not have been grasped. For knowledge of sin and salvation presupposes some knowledge of the Creator; nobody can see what sin is till he has learned what God is. That is why [Richard] Baxter directed the seeking soul to fix his mind first and foremost on the nature and majesty of God. In the pagan West today, we need to lay the same foundation as Paul laid at Athens. We complain that our "gospel preaching" (in the modern sense) does not register with those who hear it. May not this be in the first instance because they know nothing about the God with whom they have to do? Have we taken pains to teach them who God is? The irony of our situation is that if we spend time preaching to modern pagans about the character of God we shall be told that we are not preaching the gospel. But the Puritans would not tell us that; nor would Paul.⁵⁷

3. Evangelism in Papua New Guinea.

By way of illustration regarding this principle of necessary pre-evangelistic instruction concerning God, especially the vital relevance here concerning this ignorant modern generation, consider just one remarkable, contemporary missionary experience. In 1978, missionaries from the *New Tribes Mission* commenced pioneering work with the primitive Bisorio tribe in the central highland foothills of Papua New Guinea, a people oppressed with violence, fear of enemies, personal jungle and ancestor spirits. When reasonable communication was eventually possible by means of Pidgin English and the native language, Scripture was taught to the Bisorio people over a period of eight months before the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ was formally presented. The method was as follows:

We began teaching the Bisorios, of course, about God of whom they had no concept. Their god was the sun. . . . We knew that this was where we had to begin, tearing down their previous concepts and beginning to build according to the truth. . . . We began by teaching who God was and who he wasn't. . . . [We taught] God's eternity. He had no beginning or end, that He was before anything. . . . As we taught them the Old Testament, we sought to bring out four basic things. [First], God's holiness and righteousness, [second] man's sinful condition, [third] God's wrath against man's sinful condition, [fourth] and yet God's grace and His condition for acceptance by faith in His provision for salvation. Now we figured the best way to teach the Bisorios about God was not just giving them a list of dry doctrines, but to teach through Old Testament

⁵⁶ Francis Schaeffer, *Escape From Reason*, p. 78.

⁵⁷ J. I. Packer, *A Quest For Godliness*, p. 169.

history where they could see God in action and appreciate and begin to understand who this God is. . . . We began to share the truth of God found in Genesis 1-2. And we took them through creation bringing out the fact of God's power, His greatness, His almightiness, creating things just with His Word, how He was a God of order, and a God of kindness, how He provided for His creation. . . . One of the things that stood out in this teaching, as we began to develop the character of God before their eyes in Genesis 1-2, was the fact that God was creator and that He was the owner and it stood out immediately in the Bisorio's mind that if God created everything, surely He was the owner of everything, and this really gripped their lives.⁵⁸

Subsequent to this teaching on God, creation and the introduction of sin through Adam, there followed much of the history of Israel, and the life of Jesus Christ. The ensuing spontaneous responses to the Savior, quite apart from evangelistic pressure, were widespread, leading to the formation of a church, and a ready desire by the new converts to share the gospel with other local tribes.

Come, Thou everlasting Spirit,
 Bring to every thankful mind
 All the Savior's dying merit,
 All His sufferings for mankind!
 True Recorder of His passion,
 Now the living faith impart;
 Now reveal His great salvation;
 Preach His Gospel to our heart.

Come, Thou Witness of His dying;
 Come, Remembrancer divine!
 Let us feel Thy power, applying
 Christ to every soul, and mine!
 Let us groan Thine inward groaning;
 Look on Him we pierced, and grieve;
 All receive the grace atoning,
 All the sprinkled blood receive.

Charles Wesley

⁵⁸ George Walker and Bob Kennell, tape cassette, *Bisorio Salvation Story*. New Tribes Mission, Sanford, Florida.