

want to know how we can be enabled do it if the Assembly considers it to be worthy of doing.

Ninthly, we must look to our financial experts to resource us. If the Parable of the Talents is anything to go by (and it is), the question the Lord will ask us when He returns in judgment will not be: 'How much money have you locked away?' The question will be: 'What have you done with what I gave you?'

Tenthly we must never take our eyes off Jesus. We are His ransomed people. He is the King and Head of the church. Without Him we can do nothing. With Him we can do all things.

*'And now unto him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen!'*

# ***'Declaring His Glory'***

The Moderator's Address  
delivered by the Rt Rev Bob Thomas  
to the 45<sup>th</sup> General Assembly  
of the Presbyterian Church of Australia,  
Monday 13 September 2004

*'What you worship as something unknown  
I am going to proclaim to you'.  
(Acts 17.23)*

**'Declaring His Glory!'**  
by the Rt Rev Bob Thomas

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**Email:** [ptcmedia@presbyteriancollege.org](mailto:ptcmedia@presbyteriancollege.org)  
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sometimes find themselves in discouraging situations. In particular we must forge bonds of fellowship with Presbyterians in other countries who are going through similar ordeals to the one we went through all those years ago. The emergence of Grace Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, for example, should bring us much joy as we know that a faithful testimony is again being raised in that land.

Fifthly, we must not rest on our laurels. We rejoice at the large number of missionaries raised up to go under our banner into all the world, at the re-establishment and growth of the Inland Mission, at the numbers of men coming forward for the ministry, but the fields remain white unto harvest, and we must be constant in prayer that the Lord of the harvest will send out more and more and more workers into His harvest fields.

Sixthly, we must develop into a national church. Many years ago now a new constitution was written for the PCA, but only the third part of it was invoked in order to enable the church to enter into union with other churches. Parts One and Two continue to gather dust on a shelf somewhere, when they could be brought into use to draw us more closely together in more effective Gospel endeavour.

Seventhly, we must depart with all our hearts from 'The Five Words of Presbyterianism': 'We've Never Done That Before.' It's high time Presbyterians learnt to surprise themselves and to discover not what they can't do, but what, under God, they CAN do. Brothers and sisters, if we can adopt a new church crest, we can do anything.

Eighthly, we must look to our administrators to empower us. When a new initiative or a fresh approach comes along, we don't want to see it knocked out on a technicality; we don't want to know why we can't do it; we

## In Conclusion

**W**e meet together in General Assembly for fellowship with one another across all borders; we meet together in General Assembly to be taught of the Lord through the Assembly's devotional program; we meet together in General Assembly for the transaction of business with the aim of equipping the whole church to go forward 'DECLARING HIS GLORY!'

In order to do this, we must set an ambitious agenda for ourselves as a church.

First, we must affirm that the time has well and truly come for us to declare that we are a Bible-believing church, that the Bible really is our Supreme Standard, our only rule of faith and practice, and if that is not the case, then we have no reason to exist.

Secondly, we must demonstrate to all Christian people and to all the world that the terms 'Bible-believing' and 'mainstream' are synonyms. We are blessed with three theological colleges in which every teacher is committed to the truth and authority of Scripture and which handsomely meet the requirements for accreditation laid down by both secular and sacred authorities. Humanly speaking they are the heart-beat of the church and we must invest heavily in them so as to maximise the benefit we will receive from them.

Thirdly, we must not withdraw into any shell. We can hold our head up high in the market-place of ideas, taking the Gospel into all the world and looking to the Lord to give such increase as He wills on account of our endeavours.

Fourthly, we must stand beside, support and encourage all fellow Bible-believing Christians who

## Introduction

**M**y thoughts on this night go back to the last day of the 1959 Billy Graham Crusade. Although I had been raised in middle class respectability in the western suburbs of Newcastle, sent to Sunday school since an early age, learnt innumerable Bible verses and even by that age felt called to the ministry, I did not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour. I went along to the old Newcastle Stadium every night to hear Billy Graham preach, thanks to the cutting edge technology of the land-line and 35mm slides of the evangelist in various poses projected onto a giant screen and changed every few minutes.

During the course of the Crusade there came a growing conviction that he was speaking to me – only to me, directly to me, putting his finger on my sin, calling me to repentance for sin, and trust in Christ for salvation. Being a shy 15 year old youth utterly lacking in self-confidence, I remained in my seat every night as the evangelist made his appeal. I went to the last meeting in turmoil of soul. This would be the day! Come what may, I would go forward to register my decision for Christ. Billy Graham preached. He issued the invitation. The choir sang '*Just as I am,*' and as they sang the last verse, I plucked up all my courage and went forward.

How I thank the Lord that He drew me to Himself that day, and ever since has enabled me to serve Him in various ways in His church. Thank you, fathers and brethren, for giving me yet another opportunity to serve Him, but please uphold me in prayer, and covenant with me to pray and work with all our ransomed powers for the extension of the Kingdom of God here and in all the world.

But let me ask you: if it can be as hard as that to reach someone for Christ, who is on the threshold of faith, how much harder must it be to reach those for whom God is completely unknown, who worship false gods or no God at all?

That's a trick question, of course. The answer is that it's no easier and no harder, and that only God can do it. Yes, but in the ordinary course of events, He graciously chooses His people and uses them to do it. In fact He has commanded them to do it in the Great Commission: 'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, even to the very end of the age.' (Matthew 28.19,20)

Despite the lethargy, even the heresy of many in the visible Christian church today, that commission has never been withdrawn. In fact, it weighs heavily on the hearts of true Christian people today. Like Paul, we should be greatly distressed as we look around us and see that the world has got so far away from God, that it will so willingly and wilfully place itself into the hands of 'gods many and lords many' yet it will not turn to the One, True, Living God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I don't mean to alarm anyone here present, but we must remind ourselves that the ultimate purpose in holding a General Assembly is to equip the saints to fulfil that Great Commission, to enable, facilitate, inspire, encourage the Lord's people as they go into all the world and preach the Gospel. So for our purposes tonight, in this Olympic year, we turn our attention to the way in which Paul fulfilled it in Athens in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century.

ignorance. After all they do that all day on talk-back radio, so why not treat the Bible like that too?

Some treated Paul with disdain (32a), an attitude with which we're all too familiar today.

But some showed interest (32b), and still others came to a lively faith (34). I met a young fellow recently who was best man at a wedding. He had the joy of the Lord written all over him, and I discovered that a group of zealous young Christians had met him in the market-place one day and witnessed to him. The Great Transaction was done, and Mahomet is now one of the most bright-eyed believers I've ever met.

'The arm of the Lord is not shortened, that it cannot save,' and as we continue faithful and fulsome in the proclamation of the Gospel, the Lord will continue to do His work of salvation through us.

## 4. Paul's Results

So what were the results of Paul's engagement with the people of Athens?

First, there was misunderstanding (18) 'This babbler', they called him, and your 1<sup>st</sup> Century 'Babbler' was your medieval 'Lollard', your 16<sup>th</sup> Century 'Puritan', your 17<sup>th</sup> Century 'Enthusiast', your 18<sup>th</sup> Century 'Methodist', your 19<sup>th</sup> Century 'Bible-basher', your 20<sup>th</sup> Century 'Fundamentalist', and it won't be too long before the 21<sup>st</sup> Century coins its own ecclesiastical swear word.

Paul, of course, was no babbler. One of the plainest speakers, clearest thinkers and finest apologists this world has ever known, he ploughed on regardless.

We who love God's Word, who believe it, who obey it, must learn not to flinch when the world calls us 'fundamentalists.' What we really are is 'Bible-believing Christians'. Even that, of course, is a tautology, since Christians ought to be Bible-believers by definition. But if this world's thought processes are so unsophisticated that they must label us with a tag like 'fundamentalist' then so be it. We know – and God knows – that we are not fanatics, we are simply lovers of His Word and our joy is to do our Father's will.

Then, there was further enquiry (19,20). Some people will always find something interesting in Christianity. Perhaps they will be taken with the grandeur of the English language used in the Authorised Version of the Bible. Perhaps they'll admire the teaching methods of Jesus. Perhaps they'll think the Christian faith is up for some sort of negotiation, that a Bible study meeting is an opportunity for the pooling of

For one who lives and ministers in Melbourne, 'the Athens of the South', those words we have just read have a familiar ring about them. I dare say that Athens might have claimed to be 'the world's most liveable city' of its day, just as Melbourne so modestly does today. Situated a little inland, enjoying a Mediterranean climate, a centre of trade and commerce, of culture and learning, famous for its temples and great public buildings – and hedging its bets by erecting an altar 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD' – 1<sup>st</sup> Century Athens is eerily like 21<sup>st</sup> Century Melbourne, or any other Australian city for that matter.

This leads me to believe that Paul's message to Athens in his day sets the pattern for the message we are to proclaim in the world today; his methodology provides the example for us to use today; the results he achieved lead us to expect similar results from our endeavours. The account of Paul's Mission to Athens recorded in Acts 17.16-34 provides us with four major points to consider.

# 1. Paul's Research

**W**e live in an age of research, and evidently Paul was no slouch when it came to doing his research. We can picture him strolling around Athens, climbing Mars Hill, stopping at each of the multitude of altars erected to pagan gods and goddesses, getting a feel for the place, finding out 'where they were at', what made them tick, what preoccupied their minds, how to present the Gospel in such a way as to connect with them, and what did he find?

First of all he noticed that the place was *full of idols* (16) ... Paul was no stranger to idols and idol worship. They were all over the ancient world, mostly symbolising the baser elements of human nature. Idols, idol worship and idol making were so bound up with the life of society and made such a contribution to the economy of the day that Alexander the coppersmith did Paul much harm just as Christianity began to turn that old world upside down.

Secondly, Paul found that the Athenians were *great debaters* (21) ... They loved to keep abreast of the latest ideas: 'Worshipping Zeus does it for you, does it? Great!' 'Oh, you're an Epicurean are you? Well that's fine for you, but Stoicism's the go for me. I reckon when the going gets tough, the tough should tough it out!' Sounds a bit post-modern doesn't it?

Thirdly, Paul saw that they were *very religious* (22) ... Paul knew religion like the back of his hand. Steeped in Judaism and taught by the great Gamaliel himself, he knew the religion of the Law inside out and from bitter experience. Observing the pagan religions all around him he had become an expert in comparative religion and had learnt the only

This, of course, must be the framework of our proclamation: Christ, and Him crucified; Christ, and Him risen; Christ, and Him coming again!

The world we live in today is a wicked, tawdry, sin-soaked world which needs to see and know the GLORY of God, the Triune God in His Being, Word and Works; the Sovereign God of Creation, Providence and Redemption; the God who will raise us from the dead; the God before whom we must one day stand in judgment.

### 3. Paul's Revelation

**W**ell, where do you start when you want to preach the Gospel to such a world as this? Paul doesn't seem to have known much about pre-evangelism; he seems to have known only one law of church planting ('We will give ourselves to prayer and the preaching of the Word,' Acts 6.4); so he simply launched straight into the heart of the Gospel, 'preaching about Jesus and the resurrection' (18).

When this provoked a response, he 'touched base' with them: 'Paul stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD'. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.'" (22,23)

Then he gave an outline of the plan of salvation:

**God in Creation:** 'The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything' (24,25a).

**God in Providence:** 'He himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live' (25b,26).

**God in Redemption:** 'In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent' (30)

**God in Judgment** (31a).

**God in Resurrection** (31b).

lesson that comparative religion teaches: that there is no comparison; no comparison between the religions of this world and Christianity. He knew that all of these religions were '*doing*' religions, requiring the impossible from their hapless adherents, but that Christianity was a '*done*' religion, staking all on the finished work of Christ on the Cross.

Now, I have done a little research myself. Walking among the Epicureans sipping their lattes on the sidewalks of St Kilda, and ministering to suffering Stoics in the Intensive Care Ward of the Alfred Hospital, I have discovered that these two great philosophies have entered into union, although there are significant minorities of continuing Epicureans and continuing Stoics. Nevertheless, most people today seem to me to be either Epicureans or Stoicureans.

The pursuit of pleasure is the art-form of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Even our daily newspapers devote a section to it each day in one or another of its manifestations, with colour magazines on Saturdays and Sundays; and when pleasure gets to the end of its rope, Stoicism kicks in with such platitudes as 'Cheer up, old fellow, you can always find someone worse off than yourself,' although Spurgeon says: 'Only a fiend would want to find someone worse off than himself.'

So we live among people who will 'grin and bear it' while ever they can; but when they must, they will 'grit their teeth and bear it', people who are 'without hope and without God in the world.' And the challenge we face is to be in this world but not of it; to change it without allowing it to change us; to bring it the Gospel of hope and never lose hope ourselves.

## 2. Paul's Reaction

As a result of his research, Paul was greatly distressed (16) ... Those of us who have found 'the pearl of greatest price' will empathise with Paul in this. We cannot understand why everyone in all the world is not glad to be a Christian, and we marvel that Christianity is perceived by worldly people and those of other religions to be such a threat that they must persecute, torture and kill Christ and his followers. We agonise particularly over loved ones who refuse to believe.

As we look to the whole flow of Biblical revelation, so much of it given through the Apostle Paul himself, we begin to understand this distress and perplexity.

We gather from Scripture that man is totally depraved, rebellious against God, dead in trespasses and sins, and therefore completely unable to save himself. Yet wondrously, God has chosen for himself a people whom he will raise to new life through faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour, not because of any merit of their own, but solely because of his great love and mercy for them. He has appointed Christ to die for them so that their salvation is guaranteed. His grace is so powerful that they cannot help but be saved. His promises are so sure that he will hold them fast; they will not fall away from him but will persevere to the end.

All of this understanding is drawn together in the belief that God is Sovereign in all things: sovereign in creation, sovereign in providence and sovereign in redemption.

But distress was only the motivating factor in Paul's reaction. He wasn't just distressed; he was moved to action ...

First, Paul reasoned in the synagogues with Jews and God-fearing Greeks (17). These were people he knew well. He had once shared their truncated faith, and on account of what they had done both to his Lord and to himself, he would have had every reason not to have had anything to do with them at all. But rather than stand aloof from them, rather than stand on the opposite side of the street and hurl insults at them, he went into their synagogues and *reasoned* with them while ever he could.

Then he went to the market-place where he spoke with the Epicureans and the Stoics (18). Paul puts us to shame when it comes to mixing it with people, taking the Gospel up to them on their home turf and talking with them in terms they know well, yet keeping on track in the presentation of the Gospel.

But he sets us an example that we should follow: stay and reason with those whose faith is truncated, go and show to them what the Bible says, and go out and reason with all sorts and conditions of people, whoever they are and wherever you find them.