**Renew Together 2025 1**

Renew together is the annual appeal for the work of NZ Baptist Missionary Society. The society trades under the name Arotahi.

Arotahi carries the meaning of a focus in one direction, looking towards one horizon simultaneously, concentrating on one thing together. Although there are many different works and areas we are involved in, we have one common focus that unites us.

Their vision (and ours) is to see mutual gospel renewal in all people and places of the world. We outwork this vision through our hands and feet;

Arotahi encourages and equips every Baptist Church of Aotearoa New Zealand and is committed to a people and a place in a relationship of mutual gospel renewal.

It is not about them doing it, but us partnering with Arotahi to reach the world with the Gospel.

We are called in these 3 weeks of Renew Together to deep dive into being missional. We will explore the global shifts and trends, be inspired by incredible stories from global regions, and be educated on how to identify our hand–carved purpose in the incredible Missio Dei [mission of God].

We are called to be inspired to pray for our mission work overseas and in NZ, and to financially support them through an offering on the third week.

<intro video clip>

The theme of this year’s appeal is Focusing on our head, heart, feet response to the call of mission: What we know, how God is tapping on our heart, and where that might take our feet!

And we will look at the second half of the Book of Acts as we do this.

Week 1 is entitled “Head”, and we look at places where Arotahi has been developing education and leadership.

<Video clip>

In Acts 17, we read of the story of Paul preaching to various cities.

Paul heads to Thessalonica and then on to Berea, and finally down the coast to Athens (capital of Greece, the major centre of thought/philosophy in the ancient world).

In Thessalonica, we read: v*2 As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” he said.*

Opposition to his message saw Paul and his companions chased out of Thessalonica and on to the more receptive Berea,

We read: v10 *As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.*

However, protestors from Thessalonica came to Berea to agitate against Paul there too.

Let’s pick up the story in Athens. Paul is alone in Athens, waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him.

Athens was an incredibly famous city even then. It was known for its ancient schools of philosophy (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle etc, as well as Epicureanism and Stoicism). It was widely known for its temples and altars to a plethora of gods and goddesses. It was a centre of learning, religion, and philosophy.

*v16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So* ***he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.*** *A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)*

The Areopagus is a prominent rock outcropping located northwest of the Acropolis in Athens, Greece. It served as a forum for the rulers of Athens to hold trials and discuss important matters, and it was also the meeting place for the earliest aristocratic council of ancient Athens. It was to there that Paul was taken.

Paul was spurred to action by what he saw as he waited. He was not in hiding, but out and about, looking, listening, paying attention. Paul allowed what he saw and heard to spur/inspire/incite him to share the gospel. What got his attention was the idolatry he saw; it distressed him to see it and prompted him to begin sharing the gospel.[[1]](#footnote-1)

He preached in both the synagogue (those who may already have an ‘in’ with the message) and in the marketplace (Gentiles). His reaction to what he saw was not just negative (horror at idolatry) but also positive (his witness to Christ). His message provokes interest in some of his listeners who questioned him more.[[2]](#footnote-2)

*22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 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. So, you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.***

Paul finds a point of connection with which to begin his speech to the Areopagus. He commends the Athenians' religious fervour.

Paul explored the faith and culture of the people and then says (v23), *“As I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship.”* He recognised the faith/interest they already had and seeing a statue to an unknown god used that as an introduction to explain Jesus. Paul took the time to look around, to observe, to engage the cultural landscape in which he found himself. He did not just barge in and start preaching, heedless of his environment. He investigated, used his eyes, ears, and prior knowledge, and looked for points of contact.

The writer Jerram Barrs, speaking on evangelism writes: A full-frontal attack (direct evangelism) can raise a person’s pride, create antagonism in the heart, and drive him or her further away from the truth if the ground of the person’s heart is unprepared. A straight proclamation and a challenge to faith and repentance can have the effect of raising barriers against the gospel by giving people answers to questions they are not yet ready to ask. Such directness can burn the ground, rather than helping prepare it to become ready soil for the seed of the word.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In essence Paul commends the Athenians for having an altar to the unknown God. But tells them he is concerned that that God is unknown. Paul tells them, their altar and idols will not save them and are no substitute for knowing the living God revealed in Jesus. Paul agrees that maybe it is difficult to know much about God. But God has solved this problem himself: he has made himself known in the person of Jesus, because he wants to be known. God is invested in his creation knowing him [[4]](#footnote-4)

Paul led gently into his proclamation that the unknown God that they identified was actually knowable and his name was the God Paul was proclaiming.

*v24-28 “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 human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’*

Paul begins to reveal the truth of the living God: the Creator and Sustainer, God of all peoples, and Judge. God is central to all things. A God who made people so that they would know him.

 God is an active God who reaches out and desires to be known. The God of the nations.

He quotes their poets back to them and says of God: “*indeed, He is not far from each of you; For in him we live and move and have our being.*” (v.27-28)

The God whom Paul proclaims is not another option amongst many but the Sovereign Lord of all. He is the Creator of the world and of the human race, and he is the Lord of the history of the human race.

 The ‘unknown’ God is the God he proclaims. He isn’t introducing a new deity, but one already present in the city. They may not know his name, recognise his influence or the ways in which his power is manifest among them, but he is already there.

What we see here is that God is already with all peoples. He goes before us. We don’t take God. When we arrive, we need to listen, to learn and sense where God is already at work and the openings of the culture for the news of Jesus to meet a deep angst and desire of people in a particular place and time.

But Paul doesn’t just give a “Greek interpretation” of scripture. He shares biblical revelation and isn’t afraid to challenge or critique the worldview of his audience.

 “Beginning from the fundamental assertion that God is creator of all that exists, Paul argues that nothing that is crafted by the creature can be regarded as ultimate. The religious inclination of the Athenians is genuine, but they stand with all humankind in need of repentance before God’s impending judgement. What Paul’s sermon does, then, is to take basic presuppositions of the Christian gospel and translate them into language available to the narrative audience.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

*v29-34“Therefore, since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.” When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” At that, Paul left the Council. Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.*

Paul challenged the way the people are living and their thought world/worldview. But he did so by presenting the gospel as an invitation into a new life and a new way of being. He presented an opportunity for them, not just condemnation of them.

Paul’s message contained elements less palatable to the Greeks, some that challenged their beliefs, that unsettled their worldview, but that still proclaimed Jesus as Lord[[6]](#footnote-6)

He challenges the Athenians’ view of God as being static and enclosed in material objects.

He reveals God as Judge who will bring justice and will do so through the crucified and resurrected Jesus. God acts and has acted in the resurrection of a person.

He challenges notions his audience may already have in their heads. The Greeks believed in the immortality of the soul, but a physical, bodily resurrection was alien to their thinking as the body/material world was an impediment to be escaped.

The resurrection was ‘foolishness to [some] Greeks;’ it was a stumbling block for many people but was still a central part of Paul’s message about Jesus. The resurrection was not a point that Paul compromised on nor omitted from his message:

“Christian preaching will not be taken seriously if the preacher merely reformulates the beliefs of the general public or of a particular audience. If there was general agreement concerning beliefs about God and the world, and about human existence and the accountability of human beings, there would be no need for Christian preaching.” [[7]](#footnote-7)

This Athens episode emphasizes some truths for those who preach the gospel:

1. approach people wherever they are and whatever their social identity.
2. the proclamation of the gospel involves seeking points of agreement and stating points of disagreement.
3. Christian beliefs involve truths about God, human beings, the world, and about Jesus that cannot be compromised. We bring the gospel message.
4. Mission is not a monologue. Mission opens up a conversation, a dialogue, an opportunity to share about the living God revealed in Jesus Christ and learn about each other.

Paul did not beat around the bush; he directly engaged the current culture. [[8]](#footnote-8) He could do this only because he had watched and observed before opening his mouth.

He looked for points of contact with the cultural desires he sees embodied around him.

We too must not combatively stress the fundamental differences as our first approach but must appreciate what is laudable in each faith while dialoguing with them about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. [[9]](#footnote-9)

We are warned that Christian preachers and missionaries who neither know nor understand the intellectual and material culture in which they seek to proclaim the gospel cannot possibly know which ideas and formulations constitute points of contact and agreement that can help listeners to understand the new content of the gospel message.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Evangelists are servants. Colonialists are masters. Evangelists identify with the culture of others. Colonialists impose their culture upon others. [[11]](#footnote-11) For too long missionaries have been seen as colonialists, imposing their beliefs over the top of indigenous culture.

So, we attempt to speak the language of the person at the door. Many walk or are brought through our doors with little or no church background. They do not speak our language, so we need to be determined to speak theirs well. [[12]](#footnote-12)

Criticising, judging or condemning non-Christians for their behaviour completely undermines the very purpose and nature of the Gospel and the work of Christ.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Paul preaches with honesty and grace. Despite the aggravation his observations of the city caused him, Paul still shared the gospel honestly and with an open, generous spirit. He

 wanted God’s best for them. He confronts Greek culture honestly and graciously. Good points and bad points. His desire is not for his anger at idolatry to be justified but for them to know God.

John Stott points out that “Many people are rejecting our gospel today not because they perceive it to be false, but because they perceive it to be trivial. "People are looking for an integrated worldview which makes sense of all their experience." (“Apologetics in an Age of Despair - The Gospel Coalition”) We learn from Paul that we cannot preach the gospel of Jesus without the doctrine of God, or the cross without the creation, or salvation without judgement. Today's world needs a bigger gospel, the full gospel of scripture, what Paul later in Ephesus was to call ‘the whole purpose of God’ .”[[14]](#footnote-14)

The message can never be contextualisation nor accommodation. There must always be a challenge and proclamation of the Lordship of Christ and an invitation to know him. There are some non-negotiables: knowing how and when to share them is up to us under the guidance of the Spirit in tandem with what we see and hear. The call to repentance is a challenge to the Greeks to acknowledge God’s sovereignty and heed his call. God gives people an opportunity to repent of their idolatry.

The principles from this story about Paul in Athens has relevance not only to missionaries working in Asia and South east Asia, but for us too in our increasingly multicultural New Zealand, in our increasingly atheist New Zealand

Prayer



1. John Stott *The Message of Acts*, 279 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Stott 280 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jerram Barrs *Learning Evangelism from Jesus* 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Tom Wright *Acts for Everyone, Part* 2, 90 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Beverly Roberts Gaventa *Acts: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries* 254 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gaventa 252 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Eckhard J. Schnabel *Acts: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT*, 748 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Darrell L. Bock Acts *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT* 573 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. David Lundy *Borderless Church: shaping the church for the 21st Century* 80 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Schnabel, 746 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Lundy 81 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Lundy 146 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Barrs 30 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Stott 290 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)