

Times, they are a change 'in.

I grew up on a small farm in a small town. I remember Sunday mornings growing up. I would put on a pretty dress, girls were not to wear pants back then, occasionally I would sport a bonnet and white gloves and a little purse. We were poor, but proper. We lived out the country so we would all pile into the station wagon and drive for what seemed like ages to get to church. I was the youngest, so my place in the car was standing up in the space between the front and middle seats. This was long before seatbelt laws. Pastor Halverson, during his sermons, would always slam his fist down on the pulpit and say "Well, well, well..." and then proceed to explain some passage of scripture. After worship, Sunday school, working on projects, playing, socializing and eating donuts, we'd pile back into the station wagon and head home for family Sunday pot roast supper.

Sunday's were the thread that wove the rest of the week together. Blue Laws insured those threads were tightly secured. There was nothing else to do on Sundays. No shopping, no school events or sports. In the small town where I grew up it seemed everybody went to church and the whole world rested on Sundays. Well, except for mom who was always busy cooking or working in the kitchen.

Sometimes we grieve the good old days, don't we? Life seemed so much simpler back then. But then we'd also have to admit that sometimes the good old days weren't always really all that great, either. Our memories can be selective.

The good old days...

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The reality today is that the Christian Church is no longer the cornerstone of American life. It certainly no longer has the cultural authority it once had. Here in the Northwest only around 40% of the population even attends church. Yet, even as people are abandoning the institutional church, a growing number of the “religiously unaffiliated” say they are spiritual, just not religious. Millennials, in particular, are highly skeptical of religious institutions.

How does the Christian church maintain relevance in today’s culture? A culture that is post-modern, post-Christian, post-religious, post-institutional and post-denominational? Like Paul in Athens, we are being confronted with our own Areopagus moment.

Our reading in Acts takes place during Paul’s second missionary trip. When traveling, Paul’s custom was to find the local synagogue, receive their hospitality of food and shelter, and preach on the Sabbath. Paul was a rabbi, an expert in the Hebrew Scriptures, and would be a welcomed preacher. He was on familiar ground in the synagogue. He would proclaim how Moses and all the prophets pointed to Jesus. I wonder if he didn’t also start his sermons by first pounding his fist on the pulpit.

But as Paul moved into Athens, he entered a very different world. This was the world where Socrates, Plato and Aristotle once walked the streets. The home of great university academicians and philosophers. The birthplace of modern democracy. It was a world far removed from the culture of Jerusalem and knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures. Idols, altars and temples were everywhere. A whole smorgasbord of Gods, Zeus, Athena, Ares, Artemis, Apollo, to name a few, ruled over life and might help you out if you offered them appreciation and sacrifices. There was even an altar to “the unknown god,” as a safety precaution against invoking the wrath of some god that they might have overlooked in their ignorance. The gods could be temperamental.

In Athens, philosophers and the free-born elite liked nothing better than to converse and debate new ideas. The hot spot for gathering to discuss the latest ideologies was the market place, the agora. The agora was the economic, political, and cultural hub of the city. Athenians were always ready to hear something new. And Paul had something new.

It wasn't long before Paul caught the attention of the two dominant Greek philosophical schools, the Epicureans and Stoics. They invited Paul to the Areopagus, perhaps better known to us as Mars Hill, to talk about his strange new ideas. They wanted to find out if he was more than a babbler.

Epicureans were practical atheists and materialists. Adherents were primarily in the elite classes. They held that if the gods existed they were distant, irrelevant, and uninvolved. They viewed religion as a source of fear. The goal was to live a happy, content, and balanced life in the here and now. Enjoy life! Was their motto. Today, we might say the Epicureans were the *nones and dones*.

Stoicism was the popular philosophy of the day. Stoics believed God was cosmic reason, an impersonal force that permeated all creation. Your job was to live in harmony with nature, be self-sufficient, unmoved by feelings or circumstances. We might say the stoics were spiritual, but not religious.

Paul faced a dilemma. How do you tell people the good news about Jesus who don't know the scriptures, who really aren't all that interested in them, and who held quite different theological views?

Similarly today, the stories of the Bible are not very well known anymore. How can we offer our Christian distinctive in a relevant way in the pluralistic marketplace of ideas in this global village called Olympia? How do we engage the world in conversation? Do we continue with traditional approaches? Or do we develop new ways of being church and adapt the form of our message to our context?

Paul adapted. Paul did not use the methods of the synagogue. He didn't stand on a soap box and quote scripture at them. He did not begin by reciting Jewish history as he did in the synagogue. Paul tossed ideas around with them. He engaged in dialogue and mutual ponderings. And in the Areopagus, he starts where they are at with a philosophical point of view and used examples they understood. He finds common ground by quoting two of their respected poet philosophers, and bridges the gap between the Athenian altar dedicated to "the unknown god" and the God of creation that wants to be known.

God was not far off as the Athenians thought. Even their own poets had said "In Him we live and move, and have our being" and "We are His offspring." We are all created in God's image. We are all part of God's family. We all innately yearn after our Creator, even though God is always near.

Both the Stoics and Epicureans sought answers to the deep questions people have about life and death. Paul honored their philosophical and spiritual quests. He met them where they were at. What Paul did not do was water down his message. He adapted its form to make it relevant.

Today the church is facing a similar adaptive challenge. Our own Areopagus moment. We no longer live in a world of Bonnets and Blue Laws. Fewer and fewer people know the scriptures. The opposite of being relevant is being obsolete. About 4000 churches around the country close every year. What may need to be changed?

Like Paul we need to be observant. We need to listen deeply from within our culture. Pay attention to the details. Read the inscriptions. What are the unknown gods in our culture – the deep needs, aspirations and longings in our community? How do we minister to the spiritual searchings of the "spiritual but not religious" and the "none and dones"? Can we step out of our traditions

enough to do so? How can we be more relevant in the market places to which we are being called?

Originally, Paul had not planned on going to Athens. Paul had planned on going to Asia. The Holy Spirit altered his plans. Sometimes the Holy Spirit alters our plans, too. Even the plans of congregations. Jesus revealed to us a God who is love. A God who comes in search of us. A God who is not far off, but near, and who is already at work and on the move in our community and world. Paul made the most of his opportunity in Athens. May we do so here as well. Amen.