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ONLINE

RENEWING MINDS THROUGH BIBLICAL TEACHING

PAUL FOR TOMORROW'S WORLD

BY N.T. WRIGHT

Paul for Tomorrow's World

Pastors, preachers and teachers have often, in my experience, struggled to relate the apostle Paul to today's world, never mind tomorrow's, but unless we are going to abandon either one half of the New Testament on the one hand or the hope of a relevant gospel on the other the challenge must be faced. And since I have spent a fair bit of the last few years trying to puzzle over Paul I guess it's incumbent on me to say how I at least have come to see his relevance for the world that my children and grandchildren seem likely to inherit.

I am, however, reminded of the bishop who said, plaintively, that 'Everywhere St. Paul went there was a riot; everywhere I go they serve tea!' That should make us wonder whether the gospel Paul preached is being faithfully reproduced in today's churches; can it really be that Paul's scandalous message has been so thoroughly internalized in our western society that we no longer expect the riots? Or might it be that we have trimmed our Pauline sails to the prevailing cultural winds so effectively that the message is no longer as scandalous as once it was? These questions could occupy an entire book. Many passages in the letters, and some in Acts, cry out to be included and I must be highly selective. What I want to do is to open the questions up from four different angles and, I hope, set you thinking and asking questions and going back to the text to see for yourselves.

My title is 'Paul for Tomorrow's World', but to get at the underlying question we need to expand that phrase just a bit. Most of today's world, let alone tomorrow's, doesn't read Paul and shows no signs of doing so any time soon. This title is really a shorthand way of asking the question, how can the reading of Paul's letters resource the church so that the people of God can

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be the people of God *in and for* tomorrow's world? The church itself, wrestling intelligently and prayerfully with Paul, is the missing middle term in the question.

Now for many in the churches the apostle Paul has been synonymous with one particular doctrine, 'justification by faith', and one particular interpretation of that doctrine, namely that the way to get to heaven you don't do good works, you simply believe. That is of course a truncated and distorted version of what Paul actually taught. But it's what a lot of people think he taught, and they therefore suppose that Paul, in helping people to be rescued *from* the world, has little to say by way of a message *for* the world. In fact, some might say that the only message Paul has for the world, today or tomorrow or any time, is that it's full of sinners needing to be saved from the world.

Alternatively – and you meet this every time a radio or TV station decides to do something about Paul – people have seen the apostle as the teacher of a severe and restrictive morality; and people wonder, again, what on earth such a person might have to say to today's, let alone tomorrow's world. This is ironic: Paul is sometimes seen as irrelevant because he says we shouldn't do good works, and sometimes because he says we should. I hope to show that things are far more interesting than that.

A World Out of Joint

Tomorrow's world shows signs of being a more dangerous and difficult place than we have been used to imagining. The optimism of the early 1960s, somehow outlasted Vietnam and continued through subsequent decades, so that even at the turn of the century our political leaders could still speak as though the great dream of progress on which the post-enlightenment world had lived for two centuries was still alive. September 11, 2001 provided a nasty jolt for that dream, but our leaders have gone on assuring us that we are well capable of draining the swamp where terrorism comes from, of ridding the world of 'evil' with a few well-placed bombs. Now, over a decade later, we should all know that the

rhetoric has let us down, that things are much more complicated than that, though our leaders still can't admit it. We have made the world less safe, not more; we have revealed, accidentally, that the global problems run much deeper than we had imagined. The world our children and grandchildren will inherit from us is a world more full of suspicion, hatred and anger than before. And, as we might have predicted, the suspicion and anger is not just between nations and ethnic groups. It runs through each community. Your own society, here in America, has in my lifetime become much more polarized, with your culture wars reflected with worrying clarity in your political debates, and the rest of the world looking on and wondering if this is really the way to choose the de facto leader of the western world . . .

Faced with that challenge, Paul's doctrine of justification by faith might seem completely irrelevant, offering an assurance of otherworldly salvation rather than addressing the problems of the world. Some, of course, would rejoice in this: who cares about this world, if Jesus is offering us a passport to leave the world and go elsewhere? But that was never Paul's position. He believed in renewed creation, not in the abandonment of the world. And actually, though you'd never know it from many expositors, Paul's doctrine of justification by faith is itself organically and directly linked to his vision of God's new creation. How does that work?

It works because Paul's major expositions of justification, especially in Romans, are umbilically linked to his larger exposition of the faithfulness of the creator God to his plan to put the whole world to rights. Ever since the Middle Ages, the focus of attention in much of the western church has been on how we as individuals could be put right with God; the Reformers were giving fresh biblical answers to the question bequeathed to them by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. But in doing so they and their successors regularly missed the larger framework which is clear in most of Paul's letters. That framework was all

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about the renewal of the whole creation. Romans 8 insists that the goal of it all is for creation itself to be set free from its slavery to decay, to share the freedom that comes when God's people are glorified. Romans 8 isn't about something other than Romans 1—4.

This is how it works. Paul's biblically rooted view is that God made his world in such a way that it would work properly when ruled over by human stewards who reflected God's wisdom into that world. That's what it means to be made in God's image. But how can this come about? Paul's vision of new creation, under the rule of redeemed humanity, gives us the clue – because this is not a vision only for the ultimate future.

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Paul's doctrine of justification is part of what in the trade we call *inaugurated eschatology*, the belief that what God intends to do in the coming age has already been launched in the middle of the present age. The cross and resurrection of Jesus encapsulate, Paul believed, God's condemnation of evil and his launching of new creation. It has already begun, and we are called to be part of it. We need to follow Paul in taking the idea of justification out of the essentially mediaeval framework of how to get to heaven and put it into the essentially biblical framework of how God is putting the world to rights. *God, through the gospel, puts people right so that through them he can put the world right.* Those God justified, he declares, them he also glorified. And 'glorification' doesn't mean 'going to heaven'. It means, as anyone in Rome in the first century might have told you, being put in charge. God's justified people are God's world-transforming people.

At this point Paul is exactly on the same page as the Jesus of the Beatitudes. When God wants to transform the world, he doesn't send in the tanks, as we often assume. He sends in the meek, the pure in heart, the mourners, the justice-hungry folk; and by the time the rich and the powerful have woken up to what's going on, Jesus'

kingdom-people, Paul's justified-by-faith people, have set up schools and hospitals, centres of hope for communities. They have begun to transform the world. We in the post-enlightenment world have for too long believed the lie that Christianity is part of the problem, not part of the solution. In fact, the world has been transformed and is being transformed by people who know themselves to be debtors to God's mercy alone. Here, then, is the practical outworking of justification by faith alone. Without that, it's easy to be arrogant, to think that our plans and projects will bring healing and transformation. They won't. It's only the people who know themselves to be rescued by God's mercy alone who will be humble enough, broken-hearted enough, to be agents of real healing and change in God's broken world. Tomorrow's world looks like being every bit as damaged and wounded as our own. We need the Pauline gospel of justification, in its full biblical sense, not least its full context in Romans and Ephesians, to generate a new generation of humble stewards, agents of new creation.

That reframing of justification has got us going. I now want to bring it into sharper focus by looking at one of the great puzzles of tomorrow's ultra-postmodern world: which story can we now live by?

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A Story that's Run out of Steam

One feature of our world which is going to get more pronounced in the next generation is the sense that our large controlling narratives have run out of steam. The great Enlightenment dream of progress has let us down badly; the media and the politicians still keep on invoking it, because it's the only story they really know. But underneath it's been hollowed out in so many ways that we are

heading for a big crash, a big crunch. Perhaps it will come when some other nation takes over as the leading world superpower, and starts to behave towards the western powers as we in the west have behaved for a long time towards everybody else. Perhaps it'll come when global warming finally melts the polar icecaps and we plunge into a climate change in which the ways of life we now take for granted quite suddenly become unsustainable. Perhaps it'll be when our present democratic institutions, which goodness knows are creaking under the weight of unrealisable expectations, are finally seen to have failed to produce the wonderful world they promised. Who knows? But the point is that we are still living, and teaching our children to live, on a narrative which embodies a dangerous lie. That narrative declares, implicitly, that we in the west, ever since the eighteenth century, have come of age with our science and technology, so that we are now the enlightened ones, a race set apart, able to create our own truth and choose our own standards and inflict them on others. 'Now that we live in the modern world,' we still say; or 'now that we live in the twenty-first century', as though we were all signed up to the great narrative of modernity. Our grandchildren will shake their heads at us as they realise that the postmodern critique should have undermined all this long ago. The story was always an implicit power-story about *our* progress, *our* enlightenment, and almost always at someone else's expense. At the heart of it was an untruth which the apostle Paul can at once help us to unmask: the idea that world history turned its great corner in Europe and America in the eighteenth century, and that ever since then we are under obligation to live by that new story, to implement the new vision.

This always was at best a gross parody of the Christian belief which Paul already articulated so clearly but which many expositors have somehow missed: that world history in fact turned its decisive corner when Jesus of Nazareth came out of the tomb on Easter morning having destroyed the power of death through his own death, and thereby having snatched from their hands the key weapon used by the tyrants and bullies of the world, including the post-Enlightenment tyrants and bullies. Much western reading of Paul has shrunk his vision of this great story into purely personal terms, so that it simply becomes the localized story of my life or

yours, my sin and salvation and yours, endlessly repeated for an endless string of ahistorical individuals. Now of course individuals matter. Don't let anyone tell you I don't think they do; but they matter not least within the much larger framework which Paul sets out, for instance, in Romans 5 or 1 Corinthians 15: a vision of the kingdom of God, which has been decisively launched by Jesus in his life, death and resurrection.

We shouldn't after all be surprised that post-Enlightenment thinkers insisted that the resurrection couldn't have happened. It isn't just that modern science has disproved it, which of course it hasn't; it's that the whole Enlightenment claim was built on the belief that the eighteenth century was the great turning-point of history – which it can't have been if the resurrection really did happen. Sadly, many churches have treated the resurrection not in the way Paul and the gospels treat it, as the launching of God's new creation, but as a bizarre one-off freak, either to be believed just to show how clever God is or how special Jesus is, or to be doubted as an irrelevance. But for Paul the resurrection is the hinge on which the world's story turns, because it isn't the story of progress but the story of grace. The creator God is doing new things, launching his new project and summoning surprised men and women to be part of it, to find their lives rescued, renewed and redirected. What's more, some of the most important things about the Enlightenment and its grand narrative were borrowed from Christian faith in the first place. The ideal of 'human rights', which is now claimed shrilly by every special-interest group imaginable, started off as an inherently biblical belief; if you look at the ancient pagan world you won't see much signs of such a thing. But, as the Pope said to the United Nations four years ago, if you cut off the Christian roots of that idea you can whistle for the fruits. At least, that was the gist of what he said.

Sadly, many churches have treated the resurrection not in the way Paul and the gospels treat it, as the launching of God's new creation, but as a bizarre one-off freak, either to be believed just to show how clever God is or how special Jesus is, or to be doubted as an irrelevance.

Appealing to a detached sense of ‘progress’ won’t get us anywhere – as we ought by now to have realized, and as tomorrow’s world will know only too well.

Actually, Paul’s way of telling the story of the world was already in conflict with the great imperial narrative of his day. Under the Roman emperor Augustus, some of Rome’s greatest writers – Horace, Ovid, Livy and above all Virgil – told the story of Rome in terms of a long build-up through the time of the Republic, until at last, to everyone’s surprise, this history reached its great climax in the arrival of Augustus himself, son of the deified Julius Caesar, bringing peace and justice to the world, saving the world in general and Rome in particular from chaos and ushering in an era of prosperity and fruitfulness.

That imperial narrative was being told in architecture, on monuments, in statues and on coins as well as in story and poetry. It was the new orthodoxy of the day. And Paul saw it for what it was: a parody of the true story. In the true story, the creator God called Abraham and his family to be the means of rescuing the world, and after a long and apparently disastrous history had brought about the great change through the true son of God, the true saviour, through whom proper justice and peace had been launched in the world, and through whom the ultimate renewal of creation would come about. Much recent research has drawn out the ways in which Paul seems to have lined up his way of telling the story over against the Roman way. One of the great Roman slogans of the day was ‘peace and security’: trust us, said the Empire, to look after your interests, and you’ll be OK. It was, we might say, a large-scale protection racket. No, says Paul: when they say ‘peace and security’, sudden destruction will come upon them. The Thessalonians, for whom Roman symbols and slogans were all around, would have got the point. Jesus is Lord

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and Caesar isn't; Jesus' way of telling the story is the right one, and Caesar's will lead to disaster.

Our children and grandchildren need to learn, and they can learn from Paul if we will help them, that the imperial ways of telling the story of the world, including the modernist imperial ways, are based on lies and arrogance and will lead to tears in the end. Somehow, hard though it is in a world soaked by media repetition of the eighteenth-century narrative, we have to remember and retell the story which alone makes sense of the real world. Paul – if we learn to read him aright! – can help us do just that.

A Fresh Vision of Community

Tomorrow's world, then, will be a world more obviously out of joint even than our present one, and I know of nothing better than Paul's vision for how to begin to address that. Tomorrow's world will realise that the great story of progress and enlightenment has run out of steam, and rather than collapse into the despair of postmodern deconstruction we need to learn the true story of the world as Paul can help us to grasp it. And third, we are discovering just how difficult it is to create and sustain human community, and Paul's remarkably fully worked out vision can provide fresh insights which our next generations will need.

Here again Paul is upstaging an idea which was around in the ancient world from at least the time of Alexander the Great, but which had become much more developed under Roman rule: the idea of the unity of human beings in a single family, a single body, under single leadership. This was one of the things the great ancient empires hoped to achieve. But for Paul this took a remarkable new form. Whereas in the Roman vision it was always, of course, Rome that took the lead, Paul's vision was of a united community in which the great divisions of the human race had been dramatically overcome. In my present large-scale work on Paul I am arguing that the unity of the church across traditional boundaries is in fact the central visible and tangible symbol of Paul's refashioned worldview. The famous slogan of Galatians 3.28

– that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, no 'male and female' – is worked out in a number of different contexts, for instance in the subtle and pastorally sensitive letter to Philemon about the slave Onesimus. But it is in the first letter to Corinth that we see Paul going step by step through his vision of a genuinely united community in which the different members learn how to live together, not in a forced homogeneity but in a richly diverse unity. We see him, in particular, wrestling with the question, which is very much our question now and will be even more in tomorrow's world, of how to tell the difference between what you might call destructive diversity and creative diversity. The mainline churches have run head on into this question in the last generation, mirroring quite closely the same dilemmas in the wider world. How are we to do diversity in unity? It's all very well saying we embrace diversity, but all that means often enough is that we are drawing rather sharp boundaries somewhere else. We are recapitulating, often somewhat inarticulately, the old dilemmas about freedom itself, in particular the question of how freedom and unity can co-exist. It's the question most families face sooner or later: what are the limits of freedom and diversity, how d'you know, and who says?

We are facing this already, I suggest, in the international community, and it would be good for tomorrow's world if we could articulate the underlying problem more clearly. We have seen it with the so-called Arab Spring, in which we seem to have learned nothing from our adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan. We in the West were delighted to see revolutions bubbling up in the semi-tyrannous states along the North African seaboard, even though we had worked quite closely for decades with the rulers whose imminent demise we were now trying to hasten. We assumed, as we did in Iraq, that this would mean a sudden outbreak of western-style liberal democracy. That shows not only how naïve we were, but how little we really wanted any kind of diversity. Do the last two and a half centuries of supposedly enlightened western living, with our major wars and financial disasters, really provide an ideal model? In particular, the recent crises, not least the present one in Syria, reveal how incapable we are of creating and sustaining genuine and working world community. Our institutions, especially the United Nations, are better than nothing but hopelessly weak.

How then do we do community? How is tomorrow's global village going to get along?

Here Paul offers an extraordinary working model. Notice the sequence of thought in the letter to the Ephesians. In the first chapter of Ephesians Paul declares that God's ultimate purpose is to unite all things in Jesus Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. That vision of differentiated unity is then worked out in the second chapter, on the basis of justification by faith, in the coming together of Jew and Gentile into the new temple, consisting not of bricks and mortar with a fence down the middle, but of a human community in which the living God dwells by his spirit. And it is that vision to which Paul then refers in chapter 3 when he says that *through the church* the many-splendoured wisdom of God might be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. This is then worked through in the differentiated unity of different ministries in chapter 4, and in the holiness of the community and particularly of marriage in chapter 5. But it's that line in chapter 3 which shows that Paul's vision of the church is not simply for a closed, private community, away from the rest of the world.

One of the principal reasons why Paul's writings are important for tomorrow's world, not just tomorrow's church, is that the church is supposed to be an outward-facing sign, known and read as he says elsewhere by all people. It is supposed to be a working model of how to do differentiated unity, and a working model at which those outside will look and recognise that this is nothing less than the multi-coloured wisdom of God in action.

Now you may say that we are as far away from realising that in the church as we've ever been, and it would be hard to disagree; though I do think that actually we have made great strides ecumenically in the last two or three generations. But part of the problem is, I think, that we have not really taken Paul seriously as the theoretician of how to do differentiated unity. We have relegated that to a section called 'ecclesiology' or 'ethics', right at the back of our big protestant Pauline theologies. But for Paul it's right at the

front of what he's doing in letter after letter, and particularly in 1 Corinthians.

For Paul, differentiated unity doesn't mean a free-for all. There are firm, clear boundaries. Some things are unacceptable: personality cults, for instance, in the first few chapters; incest and inter-Christian lawsuits, and various other things, in chapters 5 and 6. But then, at the heart of the letter, we have the long section in chapters 8—10 about food offered to idols. Here Paul articulates the vital principle of *adiaphora*: there are some things which are in fact 'indifferent', things about which it is fine for Christians to disagree and over which they do not need to divide. We are not good at this; we have not, by and large, thought it through. For us, especially in our shrill new postmodern pseudo-moralities, once we've grasped a point we know we're right and will simply call everyone else rude names. But we need to recognise that there is a difference between two sorts of differences. There are differences which really do make a difference; but there are also differences that should not make a difference. Paul spends quite some time teaching the church about both, and this is a lesson as much for tomorrow's world as for tomorrow's church.

For Paul, the things which are *adiaphora* are the things which, if elevated into principles, would divide the church along cultural or ethnic lines. That's why he declares that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters. But note what he says. Those who have reached the conviction that something – say, the eating of sacrificial meat – is *adiaphora*, that you don't need to divide the church over it, are under an obligation to those who in conscience have not yet reached that point. One cannot force one's decision on *adiaphora* on a fellow Christian. There are lessons here which Paul has thought through but which neither we in the church, nor we in the wider world, have really wrestled with.

Paul is after all a pastor as well as a theologian. He knows that a decision reached on theological grounds may take some while to work through. And while that process is going on the rule must be that of self-sacrificial love. That is why, of course, the letter climaxes in the great picture of the body of Christ in chapter 12 and

the poem about love itself in chapter 13. But I venture to suggest that chapters 8, 9 and 10, wrestling with great sensitivity and considerable sophistication over the question of 'things indifferent', and how to maintain unity when faced with major cultural divisions, is a word not only for today's church but also for tomorrow's world. I would love to think – dream on, you may say – that the church would so learn these lessons that it would indeed be a sign to the world.

One of the great signs of hope in the last generation has, of course, been the transformed situation not only through the Civil Rights movement in this country but also, I think particularly, in South Africa. Who would have imagined, thirty or forty years ago, that we would see a black Archbishop chairing a Commission of Truth and Reconciliation? Who could deny that such a thing is still equally unthinkable, but also equally necessary, in the Middle East, in Northern Ireland, and no doubt in many other places too? And who can deny that it was the witness of most of the South African churches (not all, alas), through the latter years of Apartheid, that forced the country's rulers not only to accept the transition to democracy but then to embrace the way of reconciliation rather than the way of recriminatory violence? What counts, of course, is the message of the cross itself. But when we study Paul we see that what he is doing is not only saying 'it's all about the cross', true though that may be, but also working out in painstaking detail what it's actually going to look like on the ground. As I said, Paul's vision of the unity of the church, and of the cross-shaped way in which that has to be accomplished, is the central symbol of his worldview. It is there, from one angle or another, in letter after letter. This provides a sign of possibility, and perhaps even of hope, which I hope our children and grandchildren will pick up. They are going to need it in tomorrow's world.

The Radical Worldview

The fourth and last element I want to look at has to do with the entire worldview which Paul is offering through his radical revision of the theology of second-Temple Judaism. This could obviously be

the subject of several lectures in itself, but I want to try simply to hit the highlights. When it comes to questions of worldview, our grandchildren are being born into an earthquake zone. Things I grew up with as fixed and stable are being shaken to bits. Sometimes that's a good thing; the 1950s was not a perfect world! But no single new worldview is coming into play to replace them. How can we put this simply?

Cicero, writing a century before Paul, divided worldviews into three. There is the Stoic view, a sophisticated form of pantheism: there is divine life at the heart of everything, and the human task is to live in conformity with that inner, divine, rational impulse. At the opposite extreme is the Epicurean view: the gods, if they exist at all, are separated from the world by a great gulf, so that the world gets on and does its own thing under its own steam – a primitive form of undirected evolution, in fact – while the gods are away by themselves, happy but unconnected to the world and unconcerned with it. The best thing for humans is then to copy the gods and try to get away to a quiet life untroubled by the stresses of the rest of the world. Then there is Cicero's own view, which is a development of Socrates's questioning method but without Socrates's apparent faith. This so-called 'Academic' view held that there wasn't enough evidence to decide things one way or another, so the best course was to keep the old religions going just in case.

Now most westerners today, including alas a great many practicing Christians, live within an Epicurean world in which God or the gods are a long way away, up in heaven, while our world does its own thing in every sphere from biology to politics. Much western civilization was built on this premise. Thomas Jefferson was an Epicurean; so were many scientists of the time. If this worldview were true, Christian faith would consist, and has consisted for many, of trying to get in touch with this distant god and hoping eventually to escape and live with him forever. However, that sort of 'religion' has almost nothing to do with actual Christianity. Certainly it bears no relation to anything Paul was talking about.

In Paul's day, by contrast, the default mode for most was some form of Stoicism. Stoic Pantheism was a grown-up version of

ancient paganism: once people started to reflect about the tree-gods and the sea-god and the gods of war or money or sex or wine it was a short step to suggest that a single divine energy was pulsing through everything. There are quite a few Stoic-style pantheists or panentheists around these days, partly in reaction against the split world of modernist Epicureanism. But this, too, has nothing much to do with Paul. Nor, of course, would Paul countenance the Academic agnosticism.

Paul responds to all three positions, and articulates his own, in the remarkable address on the Areopagus in Acts 17. And here particularly we notice that this isn't just a message to the church. It is a model for what the Pauline church needs to say to the world – to tomorrow's world in its increasing worldview-confusion. I covet for my grandchildren a clarity of vision at precisely this point.

Paul begins, famously, with the altar to the unknown god. He has found, in Athens, something he can interpret in terms of the local culture keeping a window open to fresh possibilities. He quickly rules out the possibility that this unknown god might be one of the usual pagan sort. The standard systems of idolatry, of temples to this or that divinity, are simply a category mistake. The almighty does not live in houses made with hands. Paul is not just finding points of contact in the culture; he is emphatically ruling some central ones out altogether. But then he goes on to say, with the Stoics and against the Epicureans, that the divinity is not far away from any one of us, and that in him we live and move and have our being, while insisting, against the Stoics, that god and the world, and god and human beings, are not the same thing. The true God is the creator; 'we are his offspring'. And part of the result of this is that all humans are in fact part of the same family, of the same blood – as radical a suggestion then as it would be in many parts of the world still today.

Paul, then, is navigating his way through the minefields of ancient worldviews, and articulating an essentially Jewish position in which God and the world are intimately related but not identical. But then comes the crunch. Yes, he says to the Academics, up to now there wasn't enough evidence to be sure about all this. But God has fixed

a day on which he is going to call the whole world to account – again, a basic Jewish doctrine. The creator has a responsibility to put his world to rights, and he's now declared how this will happen: through a man whom he's appointed. Paul is clearly drawing on Jewish Messianic belief at this point: the Messiah, as in Psalm 2, will be the judge of the world. The evidence for all this, then, is that God has raised this Jesus from the dead. And, then as now, some mock, and others say 'We'll hear you again about this.'

What has happened? And how might it help us today and tomorrow? Though Acts 17 is no doubt a heavily abbreviated version of what Paul actually said on that occasion, it still provides a model of what we might call a Pauline *cultural engagement*. This, in outline, is what it might look like for the church to engage with the world. There are some things in the world which say, quite powerfully, 'To an unknown god'. We must search them out and be ready to expound the knowledge that will replace that confessed ignorance. If we don't, various forms of paganism will come in and do it for us. Music can sometimes be a signpost to the unknown god. So can love. So can grief, the shadow side of love. Sometimes great buildings – sometimes, in our post-Christian culture, even church buildings or cathedrals! – can be for many an altar to a god they no longer know but nevertheless feel to be somehow mysteriously attractive. But of course we must then always be ready, in understanding Paul and what he was doing, to articulate a Christian worldview which navigates the path between today's prevailing Epicureanism on the one hand and the newer pantheisms or panentheisms on the other. And we must always be ready to speak of the fulcrum of all our faith, which is Jesus himself and his death and resurrection. The only reason any of the Christian faith makes sense is if you put Jesus himself in the middle.

Sometimes, in our post-Christian culture our cathedrals can be for many an altar to a god they no longer know but nevertheless feel to be somehow mysteriously attractive.

But, you might say, all this sounds very cerebral. Most of us aren't

great thinkers, most of us aren't very often in situations where we could actually expound these ideas, even if we did think we might have an audience that would sit still and listen. But that's not the point. And here is my answer to those who sometimes say that Paul wouldn't have said what Acts 17 says he says. *What we see Paul saying in words in Acts 17 is exactly what we see him doing, pastorally and practically, in his letters*.

The communities Paul has brought to birth through the gospel, and nurtured through his teaching and writing – these churches are the living words through which the world will see who the unknown God really is. These churches are the signs to the world that paganism is not the answer, that idols can seriously damage your health. These churches send a signal into the wider world that the living God is not far from any one of us, that in him we live and move and have our being. And these churches are to make it clear, by their common life and their unity across normal barriers, that God has made of one blood all human nations on the earth, and that Jesus has been raised from the dead as the start of God's great plan to sort the mess out once and for all. Everything Paul says in words in Athens he is doing in the letters, in his maintenance and repair of communities. The Christian worldview is not simply something you learn with your head. It's something you learn by sharing in the life of the church, providing a pattern which makes sense of everything else.

It is this pattern, this making sense, that I covet for tomorrow's world. We are already living in turbulent times, in clashes of worldviews with which the old modernist frames of reference simply can't cope. (I include, by the way, talk about 'religion' or 'religions' in the eighteenth-century sense, which doesn't correspond to anything in Paul's world.) Just as half of America couldn't understand why September 11 happened, because it didn't fit the prevailing worldview, I fear that my grandchildren won't be able to understand why all sorts of things are going wrong with their world. But they might do – if only the churches would re-read Paul and hear what he was really on about. They will if there are signs of hope being planted in the world, Pauline-style churches where people who have themselves been put right are working at the

tasks of new creation. They will if those who find the old stories of modernism have let them down are discovering that the true story of the world focusses, as Paul's stories all focussed, on Jesus himself and his death and resurrection. They will if they discover the church as a place where people are figuring out how to tell the difference between the differences that make a difference and the differences that don't make a difference, and what to do when there is disagreement over that. They will, above all, if they discover that most central emphasis of Paul's letters, that there is a more excellent way – a way which is not called 'tolerance', as with eighteenth-century Epicureanism, nor called 'inclusivity', which too often reflects an undemanding pantheism, but is called *agape*, love. Nothing in all creation, Paul wrote at the climax of his greatest chapter, can separate us from the love of God in the Messiah Jesus our Lord. I want my grandchildren to grow up in tomorrow's world with the signs of that Pauline principle in communities all around them, communities that are continually sending a signal to the principalities and powers, to the watching and perhaps hostile world, that God is God, that Jesus is Lord, that there is a different story, a different way to be human, a different way to do community locally and nationally and internationally. Tomorrow's world is going to be both exciting and disturbing. My hope and prayer is that the church will be refreshed through the teaching of the apostle Paul to bring the love of God into that world that will need it so badly.

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