

**NOTES ON THE MARS HILL STRATEGY:  
PAUL'S CHRISTOCENTRIC FULNESS VISION, DISCIPLESHIP AND  
NATIONAL RENEWAL/TRANSFORMATION**

GEM 98:08:26 [DRAFT – COMMENTS INVITED!]

Paul had come to Athens five hundred years after its glory days — the days of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Pericles, probably to take a brief respite from his stressful Macedonian adventures.

However, he found the all-pervasive idolatry too disturbing to keep silent. [Acts 17:16.] So, in the city of Socrates, he went to the Agora (the marketplace) and started to dialogue with passersby. Soon, a group of Philosophers paused, argued with him, conferred among themselves, and took him to a meeting of the Areopagus, the Council of leading citizens which, five hundred years previously, had tried and unjustly condemned Socrates. And though the *form* of what the Areopagites were doing with Paul, while clearly not forensic, was similar to what had happened to Socrates, the aim now seemed to be intellectual entertainment at the expense of one they disdained as purveying half-understood scraps of second-hand learning

**1. The Mars Hill Strategy & Intellectual Leadership**

The Athenians got more than they bargained for. In their arrogance as guardians of the old order for the nations, they failed to discern the depth, strategy or Spirit of Christ's hand-picked Apostle to the Nations, a man personally tutored by God to change the course of history at one of its critical turning-points [*kairous*]. For, Paul embodied the new order: here was a Diaspora, Cosmopolitan Jew from Tarsus, a Greek-speaking centre of learning and Roman Colony; who shaped and pioneered that synthesis of Jerusalem [revelation, spirituality and morality], Athens [intellectual and artistic], and Rome [Law, Government and practical affairs] that gave birth to the modern West and world.

He began by going straight for the rotten foundation of classical Pagan thought and culture. Starting from its beautiful temples and monuments, he picked the altar that exposed the critical instability of Pagan worldviews: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. That is, on the most important possible point of knowledge, the Athenians were forced to admit their ignorance, in a public monument!

Such altars had apparently been built as insurance against the wrath of gods the Athenians did not — as yet — know. Perhaps more significantly, they expressed a cynicism that has been aptly summed up by Gibbon: the myths of the gods were, to the common people, equally *true*; to the Philosophers, equally *false*; to the Politicians, equally *useful*.

[A most significant modern echo is the Relativists' self-refuting claim: "there is no [knowable] absolute," which is so often used to undermine confidence in God, godliness or morality. (How can you know there is no knowable absolute? Why do you accept as universally true the claim that denies the possibility of universal truths? And, isn't it

intolerant to impose this claim on others in the name of “Tolerance”? Wouldn’t it be wiser and humbler to accept that “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” is a desirable ideal, one we strive towards by being carefully critical and open-minded as we handle truth-claims, investigations and arguments?)]

Paul then made straight for the decisive point: “Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to *proclaim* to you.” That is, the key to the field of Knowledge is Revelation, starting from our intuitive knowledge: an orderly universe without and a rational mind and ever-probing conscience within jointly testify to a Rational, Orderly, Moral Creator. [Cf. Romans 1:18 – 32.] We may suppress or becloud such intuitions, but to our intellectual, moral and social peril. Further, since God knows perfectly, he can communicate additional significant — though obviously not exhaustive — truth to us, by verbal, propositional revelation. Hence, Paul’s word: “proclaim.”

The substance of his proclamation is powerful, and pregnant with implications for community order and national life:

- God — unlike the ivory & gold statue of the mythical Athena in the Parthenon up on the Acropolis — does not live in temples we can make with our hands. [What of our Cathedral Complex?] Nor does he need our rituals and gifts or offerings to keep him happy; instead, it is he who made us and gave us everything we have. Hence, our dependence on our Creator, and our need to serve and worship him, not least out of simple gratitude [Rom. 1:21].
- From one man, God created the nations, setting their times & seasons, and their places, “so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.” That is, the nations [*ethnoi*, people groups] were created to foster godliness. (By immediate implication, when nations forget this, and choose instead to make power, prestige, pleasure and prosperity their chief values, as has clearly happened with the modern secularised West, they walk down a road to ruin; cf. Deut. 8:17 – 20. Idols, in short, don’t just come in the form of statutory surrounded by scandalous legends, but such folly always leads to ruin.)
- “In the past, God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day in which he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead”:
  - The time for ignorance is over; God has intervened decisively by incarnation, death, and resurrection: “he has made this same Jesus . . . both Lord and Christ.” [2:36.]
  - God commands repentance, a comprehensive change of heart and mind driven by recognition of the truth and godly sorrow over sin, leading to a transformed way of life [1 Cor. 6:9 – 11].

In particular, we are to receive him who is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” [John 14:6, cf. Acts 4:12.]

- This command is universal, but it is not arbitrary, demanding blind obedience: God offers proof to us by raising Jesus from the dead. In evidence of this, we have over five hundred eyewitnesses, most of whom were still alive when the record was made, and the continued manifestation of resurrection power — in manifold ways — in the church to this day. [1 Cor. 15:1- 8, Eph. 1:17 – 23.]
- Flowing from this, human culture is not autonomous or absolute: there is a set day for judgement of the world, with perfect justice. Thus, communities and their citizens are accountable before their Creator for truth, right and justice. This opens the door for prophetic commentary in light of these facts and dynamics. [Augustine’s *City of God* is a fine case study, pointing out in great detail from Roman and Greek History and learning that when godly truths and values are neglected, communities disintegrate into a chaos of tyranny, immorality and anarchy. Cf. Rom. 1:18 – 32 & 13:1 – 10.]
- Moreover, since we are created from one ancestor, there is no justification for nationally or racially motivated oppression, aggression, exploitation or prejudice. Community extends to the fraternity of all peoples. God refuses to answer the foolish question: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (This should be obvious, but so deep is the stain of racism that it must be explicitly noted. See Lev. 19:34 and Deut. 24:17 - 22 for how the alien, and the disadvantaged generally, should be treated in the community.)

On hearing these things, doubtless in greater detail than Luke’s summary, Paul’s audience reacted strongly, mostly with an ill-advised sneer: in effect, never mind the evidence and our acknowledged ignorance on the subject — God can’t be like that!

Thank God, some were willing to listen further, and some turned to Christ. But the truth had been proclaimed and backed up with adequate evidence; two thousand years later, we know who had the better case that fateful day. Paganism’s hollow core — even among the most sophisticated and educated — stood exposed for those with eyes to see, and ears to listen. The future belonged to the Apostle, not to the Philosophers and Politicians.

## **2. Implications for Nation-Building**

The Great Commission instructs “go and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” [Matt. 28:18 – 20.] It takes on new force in

light of the above considerations: God created the nations to foster godliness, so clearly the gospel and the new way of life it leads to are critical to national development. Further, those who would substitute prosperity, prestige, pleasure or power for godliness are — perhaps unwittingly — working towards the ruin of their communities. Sadly, there are many that seek to profit from misleading nations down such roads to ruin.

All of this speaks straight to us in the Caribbean, as a region of nations emerging from an oppressive colonial past and seeking our own place in the Sun:

- Nationhood was created by God to foster godliness; our nation-building strategies should therefore reflect this priority: in family, education, commerce, culture and arts, media, entertainment, law, public policy and politics, and so on. While, obviously, we need to respect the right of individuals to dissent, we have a responsibility to work towards a consensus of godliness in the community. Among other things, given the realities of “wind[s] of teaching and . . . the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” [Eph. 4:14], this means we must vigorously champion the prophetic truths that nations are so prone to forget, and work to incarnate these truths individually, corporately and institutionally. For, to do otherwise is to materially contribute to the ruin of our nations.
  
- We need to expose and tear down the misleading intellectual strongholds of our day, as Paul did in his: “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” [2 Cor. 10:4 & 5.] In short, much of Spiritual Warfare is about worldviews. Paul’s strategy in Athens was quite sophisticated, and full of ideas and examples for our own approach today:
  - He observed and analysed the communities he ministered to, picking styles of outreach that fitted in, such as Socratic Dialogue in the Agora.
  - When he responded to dominant community worldviews, he used significant cultural and intellectual expressions to expose their inner instabilities, while being faithful to a Biblical worldview — in this case, without a single explicit Bible quotation!
  - In presenting the Christian alternative, he used our common intuitive knowledge of God to bring out our folly and guilt, then put forward God’s solution and its requirements, backing up the gospel with evidence: the miracle of the resurrection.
  - In so doing, he pointed to ways in which the Gospel could lead to community transformation, thus making sure to be relevant.
  - In our day, how should we set out to respond to Secularism, Neo-Paganism, New Ageism, Islam, Radical Feminism, Afrocentrism, Relativism, Materialism, etc? [My briefing notes for the recent Cave Hill Dialogues on Faith show some possibilities.]

- We also seem to be especially vulnerable to the idea that the goal of national development should be material prosperity and a lifestyle of lavish consumption, leading to frustration and unrest at the difficulties along the path of economic development, and to arrogance where there is some success. Let us heed Moses: “You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth.” [Deut. 8:17 & 18.] Wealth is good, but it easily leads to selfishness and arrogance rather than liberality, outreach to the less fortunate, and the godly ministry of giving.
  
- The church, under its discipling mandate, has an especially vital role, given that “[Christ] who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill [*panta*, all things].” [Eph. 4:10.] For, “God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills everything in every way.” [1:22 –23.] To operationalise this, Jesus “gave some to be apostles . . . prophets . . . evangelists . . . pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up . . . attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ” [4:11 – 13]:
  - Christ came to fill “all things,” which clearly implies various aspects of community/national life: individuality, family life & sexuality, education, media, entertainment, arts, commerce, politics, etc.
  - And since “the church . . . is his body, the fulness of him who fills,” we are to be equipped and sent out to transform all aspects of life with Christ’s power and grace. (Of course, some individuals and communities may choose to reject the Gospel; they have therefore chosen the other flavour of fulness: “the wrath of the Lamb.” [Rev. 6:16.]
  - In short, the church’s leaders should play critical educational and strategic roles in nation-building, as is a direct inference from “disciple the nations.” We should be ashamed to see how often the church in the Caribbean can justly be accused of irrelevance! Our leaders should be in the vanguard of real national and regional development!
  - I therefore urge us to develop discipling ministries that focus on three overlapping phases. First, consolidating commitment to Christ, helping Christians to find wholeness in Christ. Then, we can move on to basic service and leadership, with an emphasis on the small or cell group. Third, we can move on to community service and leadership, touching all the aspects of life. Such an approach naturally integrates Evangelism, Discipleship, Community Service, and Missions.

(Elsewhere, I have proposed the ABCD Initiative as a way to tackle this task on a regional scale.)

### 3. Geo-Political Considerations

Paul, in Acts 17:26, invites us to think in terms of the opportunities and threats posed by our times and places, the essence of Geopolitics. To this we now need to briefly turn.

Our era has a significant parallel in the context of the early Seventh Century A.D. At that time, the Byzantine Empire finally defeated the Parthians (Persians), but exhausted themselves in the process. Only a few years later, in the 630's, the newly Islamised and united Arabs came sweeping out of Arabia in a vast arc of conquest that transformed the Middle East, North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula. Indeed, this initial sweep was only halted deep in France by Charles Martel, in the 730's. Thus, the 10/40 Window of our time was created, largely from nations that had once been [nominally] Christian.

Thereafter, for a thousand years, European History was dominated by the Islamic threat, leading to the Crusades — which were counter-offensives, strictly speaking — and to the bitter eight-hundred year struggle to liberate (?) the Iberian Peninsula, which ended in 1492 when Aragon and Castile defeated the Moorish Kingdom of Granada and expelled the Muslims and Jews.

With this success in hand, Ferdinand and Isabella felt free to sponsor Columbus' voyages of exploration, which were intended to finance a Crusade in the Middle East, according to his *Prophecies*. The result, of course, was the accidental "Discovery" of the Americas, and the rise of Europe to world power. (I am moved to wonder whether some of the cruelty of the *Conquistadores* and other European colonisers owed something to this background.)

In our time, the Western powers have defeated Marxism-Leninism, after a long, sapping struggle. As I write, clouds of Economic collapse loom, and the West's Secularism is running out of steam. The Neo-Pagans, ranging from New Agers, radical Gaia Hypothesis Environmentalists, Rastafari, at least some Afrocentrists and the Gay-Lesbian agenda, to older systems such as Hinduism, Freemasonry and Witchcraft, are resurgent, with a strong power base in the trillion-dollar American Economy. Oil-backed Islam, conscious of the above history, is also on the march. And, in August 1998, the President of the United States committed his nation to war against Islamically motivated Terrorism; this is bound to look like an armed Crusade against Islam to many in the Islamic world, as one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter.

The Caribbean, to the Neo-Pagans (especially to Afrocentrists such as Farrakhan), looks like a pool of manpower to go South; to the Islamic world mission, we are a natural base for projecting into North America, especially among the blacks and other minorities. [Oddly, some Islamics, such as the Libyan Government, have formed an alliance of convenience with Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, which is, strictly speaking, pagan. The underlying strategic principle is "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."]

Given the thrust of the former to usher in the Age of Aquarius with the new millennium, and the rising tide of conflict between Islam and the West, multiplied by the various concerns such as Asian Economic Flu, Environmental troubles and the implications of the Millennium Computer Bug for an emergent Information Age (which is itself a factor in the situation), the turn of the Century seems to mark a critical time for our region.

And Paul's Mars Hill Strategy, as we have seen, is about just such times and places.

Clearly then, the Church in the Caribbean — in this context, including so-called Parachurch organisations, such as the regional Student Movement — needs to act urgently, but in a carefully considered way, if our region is to fulfil its mandate of godliness as we cross the threshold of the new millennium. I believe Paul's Mars Hill Strategy, under the Discipling Mandate, and in the context of the Fulness Vision, offers just the way forward that we need.

Faithfully,

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{ **Sources note:** Commentaries & Articles by Blaiklock, Stonehouse, Bruce, and Stott were very helpful. Prior's *The Gospel in a Pagan Society*, which I first read some twenty years ago, has been seminal, as have the works of Schaeffer. Nash's series of works on Philosophy, especially his *Faith & Reason*, *Worldviews in Conflict* and *The Gospel Among the Greeks*, have been provocative, as has been Craig's *Reasonable Faith*. }