

STRANGERS IN OUR TIMES

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES 1



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Strangers in Our Times

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Welcome to *Strangers in Our Times*

Nobody likes to be thought of as strange.

Yet many of our secular contemporaries think of those who believe the Gospel as strange, perhaps even dangerous. So disenchanted has their worldview become, that they have no place for spiritual realities or God – or weird people like us who believe such things.

But our calling is to present the strange truth of the Gospel to our neighbors in ways that help them see that maybe it's not the Gospel that's so strange after all.

In this study we'll look at Paul before the philosophy club of Athens, to see what we can learn about helping our unbelieving neighbors, co-workers, and friends understand the truth that is in Jesus.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Strange Truth

And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean." Acts 17.19, 20

Embracing our strangeness

No one likes to be thought of as strange.

We are uncomfortable thinking that the folks we work with, our neighbors, or even people who don't know us regard us weird, foolish, out-of-touch – strange. Strange people don't make friends. They can't be trusted. People talk about them behind their backs, and even treat them with contempt. It ain't easy bein' strange.

No wonder we don't want to be looked upon that way.

The Apostle Paul brought "strange things" to the ears of the Athenians. But, while they considered his ideas "foreign" and "new" and "strange," still, they were willing to hear him, if only because, rather than try to avoid that epithet, Paul embraced his strangeness, and talked with such ease and confidence about his beliefs, that the sophisticated philosophers and people of Athens wanted to know more.

A secular age

In his book, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor argues that one of the defining characteristics of our generation is that it has become "disenchanted." What Taylor means is that, increasingly, most people today have become convinced that spiritual realities just don't exist, or, if they do, they're not worth fussing about. The idea of God is still there, but merely as a kind of intellectual or cultural construct, or some carry over from childhood experience. On the ground, in the day-to-day realities of existence, God and spiritual matters aren't a factor for a growing number of our contemporaries. Only strange people believe such things.

Which means that, when we come along with our message about a risen Christ, faith in God, and life everlasting, this strikes many of our contemporaries as strange truth, indeed, and us as strange to believe it.

We're not the first generation to have our witness greeted with such skepticism. Even in Paul's day, when religions of all kinds abounded throughout the Roman world, and just about everybody had a household deity or two, people heard the proclamation of the Gospel as a new thing, a novelty, something strange and foreign to their experience.

But this didn't catch the Apostle Paul off guard. Paul was well-versed in Greek and Roman culture. He understood his times. He knew the local beliefs, the workings of Roman polity, and could converse readily about all manner of topics. Like the sons of Issachar, Paul understood his times, and knew what he had to do to further the interests of Christ and His Kingdom (1 Chron. 12.32).

Rather than try to avoid seeming strange, Paul went to the very places where adherents of competing worldviews were wont to gather, and he confronted them there with the message of the risen Christ. Hence, we find him talking about Jesus in synagogues, marketplaces, at gatherings for prayer, and in the gates of the city, where town officials convened to judge on civil matters. Paul understood that, despite their settled mindsets and cherished (but unexamined) worldviews, lost people need to hear the Gospel. So he would not be deterred in his mission by the fact that others found him or his teaching foreign or strange.

And despite the entrenched secularism of our times, and the likelihood that we, too, will be regarded as strange when we advocate for a Kingdom not of this world, we must embrace our strangeness, work to

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understand our times, and carry the Good News of Jesus into the nooks and crannies of our secular age with confidence and joy.

The need of the day

Paul's experience in Athens is particularly instructive for us. For even in our disenchanted and secular age, people still live by faith. They cling to cherished beliefs and unrealized hopes, all of which are based on promises of happiness they have concocted in their own minds or imbibed from the spirit of the times. Such promises can only lead to disappointment, however, leaving people looking for something new, something different, something better which can deliver the happiness and sense of wellbeing for which they earnestly long.

Which is undoubtedly why those ancient Athenians “spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or hear some new thing” (v. 21).

What folks today don't realize – but what Paul did, and we must – is that everything people desire for full and abundant life is bound up in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They may regard this as a foreign idea or a strange truth, but it is true nonetheless, and the Gospel demands of us, who are called to be Christ's witnesses, that we overcome our fear of being regarded as strange, confront the disenchantment of our age, and proclaim the strange truth of the Gospel in clear and compelling terms.

For reflection

1. What's it like to feel strange? Why must we as Christians resist the temptation to avoid feeling this way? How can we do that?
2. What do we mean by saying ours is a *secular* age?
3. What's involved in “understanding the times” so that we might know the best ways to proceed in seeking the Kingdom and righteousness of God?

Next steps – Preparation: Where in your community do people gather to talk about ideas and issues? The local college? Bookstores or reading groups? See what you can find out about such opportunities. Look in your local paper or talk with some friends. Then set a time to go visit some of these venues just to listen in on the conversation and see what you can learn.

2 Why So Strange?

For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing. Acts 17:21

Strangers no more

It sometimes puzzles believers that their unbelieving co-workers or friends find the Gospel to be strange, and us who believe it, stranger still.

To us the Gospel makes perfect sense. We see our need, and we understand how Jesus meets that need; so we readily put our trust in Him for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. The indifference, mocking, scorn, and even hostility of our unbelieving neighbors can seem unreasonable, even ungrateful, to the point that Christians sometimes express a kind of “good riddance” attitude toward the lost: “There’s just no getting through to these hard-hearted people.”

Yet such an attitude is unbecoming those who follow Him Who humbled Himself to come among His enemies – including us (Rom. 5:10) – to remove the scales that covered our eyes, and lift us to the very presence and glory of God. We all at one time were strangers to God’s covenant, people with no hope, without God in the world (Eph. 2:12). To us, though we may not have thought of the matter this way, the Gospel was strange, and those who proclaimed it were strange as well, believing, as they did, notions so contrary to what enlightened secular thinking commended.

But now, by the work of God’s Word and Spirit, we are strangers no more; rather, we are fellow citizens with the saints, and members of the household of God (Eph. 2:13, 19)! Why should we fear those who think us strange, when it may well be that, should it please the Lord, they, like us, may one day be enemies of God no more?

Not surprising

That was surely the attitude Paul assumed, as he wandered among the Athenians, talking with whoever would listen to this strange new truth.

I can imagine that Paul was not the least bit surprised to learn that the Athenians regarded as strange his message of forgiveness and new life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. After all, it hadn’t been that long since he was in the same boat – an enemy of Christ and determined to rid his nation of those who insisted on following Him. The grace that reached Paul on that Damascus road was a constant memory. He rehearsed his testimony over and over in the book of Acts and in his epistles, so amazed and grateful was he for the powerful love that had come to him from on high, making a stalwart of a stranger, a saint of a sinner, and an emissary of an enemy.

Moreover, it was that same love of Christ that moved Paul to reach out to people immersed in false religions, blinded by faulty worldviews, and desperately in need of the Good News of Jesus (2 Cor. 5:14, 15). He understood that the people he encountered, especially among the Gentiles, had never heard the Gospel and its precious and very great promises, or its foreign-sounding doctrines and ideas.

He was not surprised that they found his teaching new or strange; rather, he relished their penchant for all things new, and used it to pique their interest and secure an audience wherever he went.

This is why we find him, in Athens, out and about among the unbelievers, listening carefully, discussing politely, gathering a picture in his mind of what he might be up against, and seeking open doors of

opportunity to tell people the truth that is in Jesus.

It probably didn't take him very long to realize that the typical Athenian was confused about truth and looking here and there for something new to plug the gaps and mend the breaches of his patchwork worldview.

Not unlike the innovation-hungry, world-weary secularists of our own day.

Seeking the lost

Athens was the home of Greek philosophy and a magnet for new worldviews coming in from the West and the East. People there thought of religion as a kind of add-on to their daily lives, and they added-on whatever deities promised to deliver the happiness they sought. Philosophy was useful for impressing others, finding a group of like-minded friends, and thinking about the world the way they thought it should be.

But Rome was the daily reality – the doctrines and demands of Caesar, staying on the good side of foreign political authorities.

Paul had come to Athens like Jesus came to Judea and Galilee – to seek and save the lost (Lk. 19.10). He seemed to brush aside what everybody in Athens knew to be true – the gods, the worldly philosophies, the Roman presence everywhere – as he held out the promise of full and abundant life through One Who had died and risen again. It's no wonder these pragmatic, superstitious people found his truth so strange.

Being labeled as strange or weird might be enough to put off many of us (“those hard-hearted people”), but not Paul. The love of Christ that he had come to know, kindled in him – as it must also in us – a deep sympathy for lost Athenians, and made him even more urgent to speak to as many people as possible about the Gospel of the Lord.

And in our secular age, where worldviews morph to suit the desires of the moment, even a message so strange and new as the Gospel is powerful to save all who will believe (Rom. 1.16).

For reflection

1. Think of the unbelievers you know – at work, in your neighborhood, or just in general. Do you think they've had an opportunity to hear the Gospel, straight and true? Or is their indifference or opposition to Christianity based on hearsay? Explain.
2. What was Paul's attitude as he wandered about in Athens? Does this reflect your own attitude? How can we bring our attitude toward our lost generation more into line with that of Jesus and Paul?
3. In a few brief sentences, what is your testimony of coming to faith in Jesus? Why do you know yourself to be no longer a stranger to the covenants of promise?

Next steps – Conversation: Do you know what your unbelieving friends believe about life and the world? Why not try to find out? Visit with some co-workers and friends. Ask them their views about what's wrong with the world, how we can fix it, and what they understand the “good life” to be. Listen attentively as they talk. Can you see why the Gospel might seem like “strange truth” to such people?

3 Provoked to Curiosity

And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean." Acts 17.19, 20

Not interested?

We could easily get the impression, in this increasingly secular age, that people are no longer interested in God or spiritual things. But that simply is not the case. For all the secular hype in schools, the media, and throughout our culture, most people still believe in God, and many describe themselves as "spiritual" but not "religious."

Which means there's no reason inherent in our times why we should not try to engage people in conversation about spiritual matters. Many people today are like those ancient Athenians. They are eclectic in their approach to life, and they're open to hearing new things, even things that seem strange to their ears. The challenge to us is to express the new life we have in Jesus Christ in ways that demonstrate the hope we have in Him (1 Pet. 3.15), and to talk about that new life in ways that don't sound old or irrelevant to the people to whom God sends us.

We need to rethink our ideas about the work of evangelism. The people of our secular age are willing to talk and open to hearing what we believe. The onus is on us to let our speech be so gracious and edifying that we earn the right to be heard (Col. 4.6; Eph. 4.29). We can learn much about how to capitalize on people's interest in spiritual things by looking at Paul.

Pushy evangelist?

We can sometimes get the impression that Paul was an aggressive, even pushy evangelist. He was always ready to speak up at a moment's notice, and he insisted that his view was right, and everybody needed to hear him out and change their ways.

Some of that picture, of course, is true. Paul was an expert at noticing open doors of opportunity, and he went through them whenever he could. As he did, he made no bones about the truth of the Gospel, and the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ.

But Paul's work of evangelism can sometimes cause contemporary believers to be wary of taking up this calling. After all, Paul was well-informed; he knew his Bible inside-out; he appears to have understood the times in which he lived and all the false worldviews circulating about in his day; and he didn't mind taking one on the chin for the Lord from time to time. If that's what being consistent in the work of evangelism requires, then it's no wonder most Christians are all too ready to leave it to the experts.

But we don't have to be pushy and punchy as we talk with others about the Good News of Christ, strange as it – and we – may seem to them.

A closer look at Paul

A casual look at some of the verbs used to describe Paul at work among unbelievers should help us to see that he was a careful and tactful evangelist. Paul knew that evangelism is a process (1 Cor. 3.5-7). It takes time, requires a variety of skills, and demands great patience and persistence on the part of those who take up this calling.

Being evangelistic is not like driving a "Gospel dump truck" around the town, with the back bin filled with

your testimony, in several versions, and every Scripture, illustration, and objection to the Gospel you've ever learned. Thus loaded for bear, you cruise around looking for someone to unload on, and then, when the opportunity arises, you back up your Gospel dump truck and deliver all the contents of the bin in blitzkrieg fashion, hoping for the best.

That's not evangelism – not *effective* evangelism, anyway. For Paul, the work of evangelism was more like tending a garden. Sometimes you prepare the soil, other times you sow some seed – little by little. Then you water, fertilize, keep the weeds out, and, above all, wait on the Lord to produce the fruit.

As we see Paul in Thessalonica, Athens, Rome, and elsewhere, he was following just this practice. The verbs used to describe his efforts suggest as much – reasoning, conversing, teaching, testifying, persuading. These are verbs that suggest a context of give-and-take, in which we ask questions, listen attentively, affirm what we can, raise what we must, wait for others to respond, and continue conversations for more than a single session.

The effect of Paul's doing this in Athens was to provoke his hearers to curiosity about the message he was proclaiming. We can imagine that if Paul had insisted on doing all the talking, pounding people with Bible verses, and refusing to listen to their questions, views, and concerns, they would have run him out of town rather than bring him into the very heart of their most earnest discussions.

We need to take seriously the views of those who regard our Gospel as strange truth, taking the time to learn, listen, talk with, and get to know them, so that they see our Gospel lived as well as hear it spoken. If we can do this, and do it consistently, we may find that, though we may be strangers in our times, others are more curious about what we believe than what we might have thought at first.

For reflection

1. What could you do to begin learning more about the people you see each week – their backgrounds, interests, beliefs, and so forth?
2. How would you summarize the Gospel in just a couple of sentences? How would you explain what this Gospel means to you?
3. Meditate on Acts 17.32-34. As you begin talking with others about the Gospel, you can expect at least these three responses. Explain each. Was Paul an effective evangelist? If you get such responses as this, what will this say about your work of evangelism?

Next steps – Conversation: Continue reaching out to unsaved people around you. Ask them questions to try to find out what they believe. Seek clarification on their views and positions. Use “Why?” and “How have you come to know this?” and “How does this work out in your own life?” Be patient and listen carefully. The Lord will be at work in your conversations.

4 Build a Bridge

Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD." Acts 17.22, 23

The Christian's task

The Christian's purpose in an age which regards us as strangers is neither to avoid the epithet by our silence, nor to harrumph against those who regard us strange.

Yet these seem to be the corners to which we have retreated in this secular age. We have all but left off wandering among unbelievers, engaging in conversation with a view to testifying and bearing witness to Jesus. And we readily vilify our secular age for being lost, without trying to understand the worldviews that keep people in a state of unbelief.

This is not what Jesus did, and it's not what Paul did, either. The Christian's task is neither to ignore the times nor to scorn them, but to understand our neighbors, their beliefs, fears, doubts, loves, and concerns, so that we might know how best to explain Christ and His Kingdom.

This requires that we build bridges with our unbelieving neighbors, and building bridges requires a helpful, affirming, patient, and edifying attitude.

The power of affirmation

Most of us respond positively to affirmation. We like to be around affirming people, whose company we find much more agreeable than those who are either always talking about themselves, making snide or critical comments, or gossiping about others.

Something in the human psyche responds positively to affirmation. B. F. Skinner constructed his entire psychological theory on observations of the ways people gravitate toward choices, situations, and people who "reward" them. While his behaviorist model has in large part been set aside, still, the power of reward which Skinner identified is undeniable. If we can learn to reward people with genuine and sincere affirmation, we may find that this will soften some of their hardness toward what they regard as our strange truth.

This is what Paul did in his opening remarks to the philosophers and men of Athens. Rather than begin at once to regale his audience with his testimony, or to unleash against them a torrent of Scriptures, or list and denounce all their sins and follies, he began where they were, affirming their interest in matters thoughtful and spiritual.

The people of our disenchanted age may not be especially religious, but if, through conversation, careful listening, and developing relationships, we can get to know them and understand their views, we will find something important to them which we can affirm, and which can serve as a bridge to more significant matters.

Paul's bridge

Paul commented on the religious interest of the Athenians, pointing out things that were true, and which the Athenians would have agreed to with satisfaction. He noted, first, that religion pervaded every aspect of their lives. He observed that they were "very religious." In a later generation, Augustine outlined the complex and thoroughly religious life of the Romans of his day in *City of God*. These people had gods, rituals, and religious practices for just about anything you can imagine.

Roman and Greek religion was a curious combination of placating deities and manipulating them at one and the same time. So, if you wanted the favor of the gods in any part of your life, you needed to make sure that you were on the good side of whatever god was the overseer of that area, so that he or she would grant whatever you wished. You'd keep the god's image on your mantle, drop a flower or coin at its roadside altar, speak kindly to its priest, and maybe even offer up a prayer from time to time.

And this, not to a few gods, but dozens, all day long. Paul observed this "very religious" lifestyle in Athens, but he did not rebuke his hearers; instead, he commented on what he'd observed. The Athenians certainly would have agreed.

Further, Paul demonstrated working familiarity with the details of Athenian religion, commenting both on the *objects* of their devotion and the *practices* they pursued in their religious lives. He didn't dismiss their pantheon of deities and plethora of devotions; instead, he used these to affirm his audience's interest in matters religious, in a sincere and loving manner. In the process, he built a bridge for the big frog he was about to ask them to swallow.

To the Athenians, it was clear this strange man understood and had some appreciation for their ways. This being so, they were willing to hear him out on his new and strange teaching.

Paul's example is instructive to us: take people seriously, listen carefully, affirm where you can, and look to build a bridge to larger issues of truth and life. We can always find something interesting, good, amusing, or true about the ways and worldviews of the people God has put into our lives. But we need to observe carefully, and hold off judging, so that we might build bridges for relationships and conversation. This takes patience, but if we love those who consider our Gospel strange or foreign, we'll go the extra mile to find something to affirm, and use that as a way of moving toward more affirming – albeit stranger and more demanding – matters still.

For reflection

1. How would you summarize the worldviews of the unbelievers you know? What do they value? In what do they place their hopes? What do they most firmly believe?
2. What can you identify in those worldviews that is good or commendable? Why is it important to do this?
3. Can you see how these good and commendable things might provide a bridge for you to talk about the Gospel? Explain.

Next steps – Conversation: Think back over the conversations you've been having with your unsaved friends. What can you find to affirm? Go back to one or two of those folks with the following: "You know, I've been thinking about what you said about _____. I really appreciate your view on this, and I'd like to hear more." Follow the conversation wherever the Lord takes it.

5 Whose Truth is Strange?

“God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.”
Acts 17.24, 25

Practices and implications

We can see that Paul understood not only the practices of pagan religion, but the implications of it as well. And he suspected that his audience, while quite familiar with and zealous for the former, had probably never considered the latter. Their religion made sense to them. Except that, as Paul was about to demonstrate, it didn’t make sense at all.

Unbelievers in our secular age are in the same boat. They have embraced a view of life and the world which they accept and pursue as an act of faith, and which suits them fine. That is, the way they conduct their daily lives, the goals they pursue, the diversions they indulge, the convictions they hold dear, and the dreams they cherish – while this all seems to be working out well enough in *practice*, seen against the larger backdrop of the *implications* of their worldview, what they believe doesn’t make sense.

But unless we understand the times, and think carefully about the worldviews we encounter each day, we won’t be able to help our neighbors discover the strangeness inherent in their approach to life.

Believers, all

The fact is, all the people have a worldview, and every worldview is grounded in a series of faith convictions – beliefs. That is, people *believe* things about the world, themselves, and how they ought to live, which they can’t prove but take on good faith. This is what they learned in school; it’s what the media and culture constantly reinforce; and all their friends think like they do as well. Why shouldn’t they believe?

People think, talk, and act the way they do because, in their heart of hearts, they *believe* this is what’s in their best interest. They probably wouldn’t try to foist their views on you; but that just suggests that they know their views aren’t universally reliable. For most people, urging others to embrace your ultimate convictions in life isn’t like yelling, “Your house is on fire!” And they don’t want you to foist your views on them. After all, each of us must reach our own convictions about the way things ought to be, without undue pressure from others. Or so, at least, most people believe.

The Greeks in Athens didn’t have to be persuaded of this; they knew all about believing and trusting and trying to line up your life with your convictions. Paul’s foray onto the bridge of religion, which he had begun with a word of sincere affirmation, may have been a little easier than ours – given the disenchantment of our age – but it was no different. His task was to communicate *his* beliefs to people who *already believed* the world was a certain way. This is what we must do as well.

Unreasonable beliefs

Note carefully what Paul did in these verses: Having established that he understood them and their religious practices, and even affirming them for their beliefs, he invited them to consider just how *reasonable* their views were. Athens was cluttered with little temples, roadside kiosks, and images of every kind, representing the various gods that pervaded the whole of their lives. These had to be cared for – temples and shelters, daily offerings of food or flowers, dusting and polishing, and whatnot.

But wait a second: these gods were supposed to have great powers. They could affect everything from your daily welfare to the harvests of the city to the security of the entire nation. Why, Paul wanted to know, should

we think that such all-powerful gods would require the help or attention of puny people? I mean, how powerful can a deity be who requires me to dust him off, supply him with a fresh garland of flowers, and make sure he gets put back on the mantle in just the right place?

And as for the Athenians' "unknown god," he was so mysterious and powerful that no one knew anything about him, except that he was "unknown." Think about that for a moment.

Is it not the same with the beliefs and convictions of the people of our secular age? Once we have established a bridge of affirmation, we will want to begin having a look at our neighbor's ultimate convictions. For example, we might say, "It seems to me you've figured out how you want your life to go. You seem to know what you want and how best to achieve it. But *how* do you know this? And how do you know that what you *think* you know is actually true? How can you be sure that there isn't something *better* for you than what you're currently trying to get out of life?"

What you will be doing at that point, as you begin to turn the focus of your conversation on your friend's beliefs, is to lead him in discovering where the *real* strange truth lies between you. Stay on this tack, searching out the implications of your friend's beliefs, and soon enough it will become clear that the strange truth in your conversations is not coming from you.

For reflection

1. Why is it important that people identify the sources of what they believe? What does this reveal about the *authorities* on which they base their lives?
2. What is the Christian's authority for what he believes? How does that authority compare with the authorities unbelievers typically rely on in constructing their worldviews? How confident are you that your life is based entirely on the Christian's authority?
3. Why is it important to help our unbelieving friends examine the things they believe?

Next steps – Conversation: Read the last section of this article again (under the heading, "Unreasonable beliefs"). Go back to one or two of the folks you've been talking with and try out this approach. How do they respond?

6 Truth and Contradictions

“And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’” Acts 17.26-28

All truth is God’s truth

A measure of truth can be found in every unbelieving worldview. People cannot help themselves. Even those who deny God, resist His Word, and insist there are no final and absolute truths, nonetheless *require* truth to make sense of their lives. And this is so, even if the truth they hold contradicts other convictions, beliefs, or practices in their lives.

This is a function of our being made in the image of God. We could no more exist without truth than without breath. And, while people may deny God and His truth, they will borrow freely from it as it suits their purposes. They may not realize or admit this is what they’re doing, but they not only *will* do it, they *must*. Part of our task in understanding the times is to observe glimmers of truth in people’s worldviews, and to show how these contradict other of their convictions or practices. We may find these bits of truth and contradictions to be useful as thin entering wedges for the larger teaching of God’s truth, and for the Gospel.

Let’s see how Paul did this.

Light on the subject

Before the Athenian philosophy club, Paul continued to press his point that no god worth his salt could be reduced to an image, housed in a temple or kiosk, or in any way be dependent upon men. That would be a strange way of thinking about the gods we hold to have power over every aspect of life, wouldn’t it? If they’re so helpless and dependent, and can be placated or manipulated by our little acts of obeisance, how can they possibly be worthy of our devotion, or depended upon to meet our needs?

We can imagine lights going on in a few heads out there in the audience: “Well, I never thought about it like that.”

To reinforce his view, Paul turned to their own authorities. Quoting from two Greek poets, Paul bolstered his view of God – that He is great and powerful, and the Creator of all, dependent on none (vv. 24-27) – and he exposed the strangeness of the Athenians’ views. He showed them, in other words, that even their own best thinkers regarded *his* view as correct, and their views and practices as *strange*.

The implications of this were beginning to become clear, at least for some of Paul’s audience: If our gods don’t need us, as our best thinkers insist, yet they require all these various duties from us, then they *do* need us, and those authorities we look to are wrong, and we are fools for believing them. Or, if they *don’t* need us, as our thinkers explain, then the gods simply take perverse pleasure in watching us perform these constant acts of obeisance, to which they may or may not respond. In which case, we are fools.

Yeab, that’s strange

The *strange* truth, - the *folly* – Paul was trying to show, lay in the views of his listeners, who devoted so much of their time and attention to fussing over deities that didn’t need them, but that delighted in jerking them around for their own pleasure. Or else they believed revered thinkers who had it wrong about the gods, and therefore may have gotten much else wrong as well.

You don't have to look too hard to find the same situation among your unbelieving friends. Ask an unbelieving friend how he can be so sure that his approach to life is true, and he'll probably answer, "Well, everybody has to decide such matters for themselves." That is, human beings are responsible for their destiny, precisely as the Scriptures teach. There's the glimmer of truth.

But wait: Don't your friend's best authorities insist that there *is* no purpose to life, and everything is the result of mere chance? In such a case, how can we be responsible for anything? Or how can we be *sure* about anything? After all, the secular philosophers and scientists to whom your friend defers for the big ideas undergirding his worldview, insist that all truth is tentative and relative. *None* of us can be sure of *anything* ultimately, since truth is always susceptible to new discoveries and changing paradigms of thought.

And that, they insist, is the absolute truth.

As you grow in understanding the times, and the views of contemporary thinkers, you'll observe such strange admixtures of truth and contradictions time and time again. Don't hesitate to point out to your unbelieving friends that it's unreasonable to insist on contradictory notions, and to build one's life on the claims of self-contradicting authorities.

In a disenchanted and secular age, people are left only with their own best ideas and strongest hopes, and the testimony of the leading lights of this age is that none of that will get you beyond the grave. If all we may hope in are our own best ideas, or the best ideas of the best minds of the age, then we are doomed to knowing nothing for sure.

And that's the truth.

For reflection

1. Modern science insists it is the way to truth. Yet it also insists that there are no final truths, and no purpose for the cosmos. Thus, we can only make observations, not moral prescriptions. Can both these views be true? Explain.
2. Our secular age insists that truth is relative, yet it passes laws to direct and constrain moral behavior. What's right about this, and why? What's wrong about this?
3. "There are no absolute and final truths." If that were true, would that be a true statement? But people say it all the time. How might we point out the contradiction of holding such a view?

Next steps – Conversation: How are your conversations going with your unsaved friends? Share what you've been doing with one or two of your Christian friends, and challenge them to do the same. Then get back to work engaging your unsaved friends. Listen for things that are truly "strange" in what they believe, and ask them to account for how these contradictory notions can be so. Don't challenge; just ask and listen.

7 The Stone of Stumbling

And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this matter." So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed... Acts 17.32-34

Our task

In a secular age such as ours, as in every age of any sort, the Christian's task is to live as a witness for Christ and an ambassador of the Kingdom of God.

It is *not* our task to convert anyone to faith in Jesus Christ.

As Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 3.5-9, our work involves preparing the soil, sowing the seed, cultivating and watering what's been sown, and working patiently to encourage rooting and growth. It's God's responsibility to bring people to the knowledge of the truth.

Not everyone with whom we talk about the Lord will come to faith in Christ. It didn't happen for Paul, and it's not going to happen for us. But as Paul was effective in fulfilling his calling as a witness and ambassador, without seeing everyone with whom he talked come to faith, so we may expect to fulfill our calling as well. The better we understand our times, the better we'll know what *we* need to do.

And as we are faithful in our calling, we can be certain that God will do what *He* will do in His own way and time.

Bringing up Jesus

Bringing up Jesus and the resurrection was no "gotcha" at this point in Paul's message. He had been talking about the Gospel in all his conversations in Athens, so he was always up front about what he believed and why it mattered so much. When he came back to the Gospel in his presentation at the Areopagus, it triggered a series of responses, each of which we can expect in our own witness as well.

Jesus Christ is the Rock of offense, the Stone of stumbling for those who insist they can make their own way in life apart from trusting in God. We shouldn't be surprised that, as we insist on the necessity of repentance and faith for forgiveness and eternal life, some will make light of our message. The god of this world continues to blind many to the truth, even when they are shown contradictions and inconsistencies in their own worldview, or their trusted authorities are shown to be not so reliable.

But don't miss the two positive responses Paul received. First, some people believed the Gospel, and joined themselves with Paul. We can be sure that he began at once to teach and disciple these people, so that they could become rooted in Christ and His Word, and begin to grow as believers.

Others were not quite ready for such a commitment; however, they didn't write Paul off, either. They wanted to hear more, and wanted to talk about this strange truth further. We know that Paul did this on various occasions – as in Ephesus and Rome (Acts 19, 28) – making himself available to any who wanted to come and talk further about the things of the Lord. We should be ready to do this as well.

Keeping the conversations going

One good way to keep such conversations going is to give people something to read – such as C. S. Lewis' book, *Mere Christianity* or Lee Strobel's *The Case for Christ* – and then meet with them to discuss it. Or you can invite your friend to begin reading the Gospel of John, and discuss it a chapter at a time.

But we must return, as often as we can, to the Gospel and its demands. As Paul noted, God is calling all people to repent of their sins and prepare themselves, by following Jesus, for the judgment which is coming soon. We're not doing our friends any favors just by showing them how strange their own views of truth are. We must lead with the Gospel and return to the Gospel, as strange as its truth may sound to others, because this is the only hope anyone has for finding the salvation of God (Rom. 1.16, 17; Acts 4.12).

So make sure you understand the main points of the Gospel, and take every opportunity, during the course of your conversations, to explain what it means and what it requires.

Christian truth may seem strange to unbelievers, but that's mainly because they don't understand how strange and untenable their own views really are. Our job, motivated by love for Christ and our neighbor, is to lead our unbelieving neighbors to see the bankruptcy of their chosen worldview against the beauty and glory of Christ and the Gospel. With patience, prayer, and persuasion, we can make real progress in helping others to discover their need of something more than what they have always believed, and to consider Jesus as the best – indeed, the only – viable alternative for all their disenchantments in life.

But we must devote ourselves to understanding the times in which we live, and pursuing our calling faithfully every day.

For reflection

1. What is the role of a witness? What do ambassadors do? How do you fulfill these callings in your life?
2. What is your approach to understanding the times, and the strange ideas about truth that people embrace in this secular age?
3. How can Christians encourage one another in their calling as witnesses and ambassadors in our secular age?

Next steps – Conversation: Make an outline of the main points of the Gospel. Run this by one or two of your Christian friends. What suggestions do they have for improving it? Then go back to the folks you've been talking with and ask, "Would you mind if I shared just a bit of what I believe about the matters we've been discussing?" Follow as the Spirit leads from there.

Strangers in Our Times

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Why is it so important that we work to understand the times in which we live? Can we fulfill our callings as witnesses and ambassadors apart from an understanding of what our nonChristian neighbors believe? Explain.
2. Each of us has a Personal Mission Field, where Christ has sent us to the world just as He was sent (Jn. 20:21). Why was Jesus sent to the world? Why are we sent into it every day?
3. What are some ways you might begin to gain a better understanding of the times in which we live?
4. We can begin to understand where our neighbors stand on spiritual matters by asking questions and being good listeners. What are some questions you might use to initiate conversations with your nonChristian friends, neighbors, or co-workers?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study about strangers in our times? How are you putting that lesson to work in your walk with and work for the Lord?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.