

PAUL VS. ATHENS: ENGAGING THE CULTURE WITH THE GOSPEL ACTS 17:16-34

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Tom Rainer recently stated in a chapel sermon at NOBTS that in the past 6 months, less than 1/2 of the pastors in the SBC have shared the gospel one time! He added that less than 1 of 10 church members in the SBC will ever begin a conversation about the Gospel. What a sad commentary on all who are called to proclaim the excellencies of God (1 Peter 2:9).

Why do we find it so hard to share the best news in the world? In Mark Dever's *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*, he provides a list of some common excuses:

- (1) "I don't know their language"
- (2) "It is illegal"
- (3) "It could cause problems at work"
- (4) "Other things seem more urgent"
- (5) "I don't know any non-Christians" (Dever, 19-23).

He also says that sometimes we make excuses concerning the hearers, such as "they don't want to hear," "they want be interested," or "they've probably heard it before" (ibid.).

We could make excuses for days, while the world waits to hear.

Recently, the popular comedian Penn Jillette, from Penn and Teller Show, was evangelized after one of his shows. Penn has been an outspoken atheist for some time. A humble gentleman gave Penn a Bible and talked with him. It had a great affect on Penn. Penn's response shocked me. He said that he has never respected anyone who does *not* share their faith. He believes that if you believe you have the truth, then you should share it. Penn asked, "How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?"

Penn went on to say about this gracious evangelist: "This guy was a really good guy. He was polite and honest and sane, and *he cared* enough about me to proselytize and give me a Bible, which had written in it a little note to me . . . and then listed five phone numbers for him and an e-mail address if I wanted to get in touch." (Baptist Press, <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=29863>; video also on You-Tube).

A pastor in Las Vegas, John Mark Simmons, commented: "That episode is a wonderful encouragement for all of us to be salt and light. If you know anything at all about

Penn or his shows, you know he pretty much represents the decayed and dark world we live in, yet someone's obedience got his attention."

Ladies and Gentlemen, let's stop making excuses. Can we do this? Let's plan to stop not evangelizing.

Prayerfully, intentionally, faithfully, fearfully, and with preparation – let's share the good news. Today we are going to look at Paul. *He functions as a great apologist and street evangelist in the heart of a cultural hot spot.*

He too could have made several excuses for not being faithful (Acts 17:16-34).

When you think of Paul, you probably shouldn't imagine a physically impressive individual. The Corinthians said that he was bold in his letters, but unimpressive in his appearance.

In the Apocrypha, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, we have the only physical description of Paul that I know of. Here, in this non-inspired text, Paul is described as "a man of small stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting . . . and a nose somewhat hooked; full of friendliness, who appeared like a man, and as an angel. "

If the account is close to true, then he was an ordinary little guy, more like George Castanza than Vin Diesel! But the little guy had a mighty message. In Acts 17, he goes up against the mighty city of Athens.

In Act 17:15, we read that the disciples took Paul in Athens and there he waited for them. Here is Paul vs. the great city of Athens. We see Paul, here, *not* on a mission trip but still functioning as an evangelist because evangelism was a way of life.

All cities in Greece had a "high city." The highest point of elevation was given over to the construction of a god or goddess, normally the patron god. In the Old Testament we read about pagans worshiping god in high places, like in the days of Jeroboam.

The Greeks had in every city an Acropolis, a high city. Athens was no different. It had an Acropolis. It was the most magnificent of all. The Parthenon was upon the high place. There were three statues to Athena, the patron goddess of the city. Today, you can't miss the Parthenon. It is well lit and high up.

About 75 yards away was a high rock about fifty feet off the ground, about a 150 yards long, where a temple was built to the Greek god of war "Ares"—who corresponded to the Roman god of war, "Mars." So we have Areopagus (Pagos – hill), or "Mars Hill." The event takes place on that platform. Below the hill is the marketplace.

Further, Athens was the center of philosophy and was the foremost Greek city-state since the fifth century B.C. Surely, Paul had heard about Athens since he was a boy, but now he was there. It was here that Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle once taught and influenced others.

Perhaps you've heard of Tertullian. He was a lawyer who was converted to Christianity sometime around the year A.D. 197. It was he who asked the famous questions, "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?" Athens was the home of pagan Greek philosophy, and Jerusalem was the central locale of divine revelation. But here, Paul takes divine truth to the center of ideas.

It is a model we should all follow. . . . We must engage the culture with the Gospel. I see at least three challenges gleaned from this narrative. . . . Let's look at

- (1) His Motivation;
- (2) His Methods;
- (3) His Message

3 CHALLENGES ON ENGAGING THE CULTURE WITH THE GOSPEL

1. *Paul's Motivation: A Passion for the Glory of God (17:16)*

A. What Paul Saw: "a city full of idols"

Paul's eyes. Paul sees the city if full of idols. In verse 22, he says "I *see* that you are very religious." They even had an idol to an unknown god. The famous quip was that it was "easier to find a god in Athens than a human being." Athens was also a tourist attraction. People would come and behold the city and see all of the temples. But that is not what gets Paul's attention first. *What gets his attention is the idols.*

The adjective Luke uses to describe the idols is found nowhere else in the New Testament nor is it found anywhere else in Greek literature in an outside source. Most English translations translate it as "full of" idols, but as some have pointed out a better rendering may be "under idols." They were under bondage. We might say that they were "smothered by idols." (Stott, 277). There were temples, shrines, statues, and alters everywhere. Statues of Athena were gold, ivory, and wood, marble, all hand crafted by the greats.

Paul's teaching About Idols. This shows us something very true about humanity. Theologians have pointed out that the opposite of Christianity is not atheism; it is *idolatry*. Human beings are inherently religious; humanity is incurably religious; worshiping totem polls and other odd objects. No civilization in the world is not religious.

Paul writes in Romans 1 that every human being knows of God through nature and through conscious.

However, the great sin is that they exchange the glory of creator for the creation. Consequently, there is the worship to everything from cows, to rivers, to people.

Paul's earlier encounter. If you remember in Lystra (Acts 14), Paul was talking to Greeks there and they wanted to make him a god. He told them to turn away from idols to

the living god. The essence of sin is giving God half a peace sign and worshiping something that he created instead of God himself.

B. *What Paul Felt: “provoked” “irritated” “distressed”*

The text says that Paul was “provoked” which is a deep visceral term. It is the word “paroxyno” from which we get “paroxysm,” which means a fit, an outburst, or a spasm. It meant to have a gut reaction.

I would call what Paul felt as righteous indignation. He was bothered by the fact that God was not being worshiped.

I think this is the greatest motivator for missions. It goes beyond compassion for people who don’t know God (which is a great motivation). This motivation is a divine jealousy that God’s name is not being praised.

Does it bother you that people are worshipping dead idols today, when Jesus alone is worthy of worship?

To feel this way is to feel like God. This is exemplified in the OT when the Israelites made the golden calf, and worshiped Baal, engrossing in the sexual perversion that went with it. It is said often that they “provoked” the Lord to anger. (See also Isaiah 65:1-7; Deut 9:7; Ps 106:28-29).

Paul saw beyond the grandeur of the city. He sees the wickedness of mankind, and how God was not being worshiped.

We are told that God is a jealous God. In Isaiah 42:8, he says that he will not give his glory to another. *Instead, we must share his jealousy for the worship of his name.*

I don’t think we will ever be missional until we experience this emotion. Elsewhere, Paul says the love of Christ controls him—that’s one motivator; but here it is “the jealousy of God that controls him.” We need both. We want to see Jesus glorified.

We should feel inwardly wounded when Jesus is not praised.

May God give us the heart of Psalm 67 – “May the people’s praise you oh God, let all the people’s praise you.” That’s the cry of the missionary. That’s why we go. Not out of guilt. Not merely out of duty. But because we want to see the nations worship the living God.

Do you long to see idol worshipers turn into Christ worshipers? Then it will lead us to share the Gospel. Notice Paul’s Method.

2. Paul's Method: Three Approaches to Evangelism (17:17-21)

Paul did not only see idolatry and experience divine jealousy; but he did something about it! He shared with them the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

Who did he share with? Three groups of people. Each group corresponds to different groups that we should share with. With each group, he used a particular method:

A. Evangelistic Preaching for the 'Religious' in the Synagogue (17:17a)

The first method involved preaching the Gospel to those in the synagogue. This followed Paul's normal practice of starting here.

Paul's preaching in the synagogue is outlined in Paul's encounter with the Thessalonians (17:1-4). In the synagogue, we see Paul...

- “Reasoning” (17:2). This word means to discuss or debate (used 10 times in Acts).
- “Explaining” (17:3). This word means to open (cf. , Luke 24:32)
- “Proving” (17:3). This term means to respond to objections; to demonstrate the validity of one's claims.
- “Proclaiming” (17:3b). This means to declare a clear message (about Jesus).
- “Persuading” (17:4). This means to act on the basis of what is recommended (7 times in Paul's preaching in Acts)

Consequently, many people were won over and “joined” Paul (17:4), becoming Christ-followers.

While the preaching today in the church is not the same as Paul's preaching in the synagogue, it is worth mentioning, and should not be overlooked, that the obvious place to start evangelizing is by preaching the Gospel every week to those attending corporate worship.

I recently preached on the new birth, and a gentleman, who handed out programs, was born again. He said he had never been converted. He was seventy-two years old. May God give us a generation of Paul's who preach the Gospel to the religious.

B. Conversational Evangelism for the 'Passerby' in the Marketplace (17:17b)

Not much is said about Paul's outreach in the marketplace, other than that he “reasoned” there also. It appears that Paul was using the Socratic method in Socrates city. In short, he presumably was dialoging, discussing, and posing questions about the Gospel.

Perhaps we could take from this account an example of the “question method” of evangelism. One of the best things to do in the marketplace is to simply raise questions. Questions do a lot of things. They demonstrate interest in the hearer; they reveal commonalities; they relieve tension; they create dialogue; and they open doors.

A good personal challenge is to ask at least one probing question to others every day related to the Gospel, and see what happens. Some examples include:

- Do you have any kind of spiritual beliefs?
- How are you celebrating Christmas (or Easter or other holidays)?
- Is there any way I can pray for you?
- Do you ever think about God?
- Do you think there is a heaven or hell?
- If you died, where do you think you would go?
- If what you are believing is not true, would you want to know?

I challenge you to be aware of those who pass by you everyday. Boldly and compassionately pose a question to them. Put something in their conscious. They may ask for more information and a longer conversation.

C. Apologetic Evangelism for the ‘Philosopher’ at the Areopagus (17:18-21)

The majority of this story focuses upon this group of individuals. Paul’s central message, the resurrection, never changed, but with this group, Paul gradually leads up to the message of the risen Christ. His use of language is strategic for this group of hearers.

I only know of these two philosophies explicitly mentioned in the Bible.

Epicureans. Today, we might say modern Epicureans are interested into sophisticated food and clothes . . . and pleasure, not pain. “Eat drink and be merry” summarizes their thought. It was not absolute hedonism; they wanted their “adultery in moderation.” But it was hedonistic. But we dare say that the hedonism in America is much worse.

Stoics. They believed that world is controlled by an impersonal force; similar to deism; but fatalistic. “Roll with the punches” “que sera sera,” “whatever will be will be” – these phrases, which may be observed by in more recent years by philosophers like Sartre and Nietzsche, characterized the Stoics.

Luke writes that they got together to discuss “something new” – everybody likes what’s new. But theology is not new. It is not physics or chemistry. Paul is about to declare timeless truth to these itching ears individuals.

Impressively, Paul was able to do battle with the top thinkers of the day. We still need people in the mainstream culture to take the Gospel to the center of ideas. John Stott states, “Christ calls human beings to humble, but not to stifle, their intellect.” (Stott, Acts)

This is why we must read books and stay up on culture. I don’t mean just watching movies, I mean staying up on modern worldviews. Know what’s blowing in the wind:

3. Paul's Message: Communicate the Redemptive Story (22-31)

Paul takes his hearers on a journey from creation to resurrection and judgment. The response is similar to the response we will get today when we take the Gospel to the culture.

We might outline's Paul's sermon with 8 affirmations about God (we could spend several sermons an on these verses)...

1. God is the Creator (24a)

This flew in the face of Epicurean thought of chance combination of atoms somehow bringing about creation. How can nothingness produce something? The Stoic was more pantheistic. God was creation. Paul says, no, God is creator.

I like to start here with the Gospel, because the Bible starts here: Creator, Image of God, then the fall and redemption.

Tim Keller, speaks about a "pre-evangelism" that has to happen sometime; meaning that some people don't even believe in creator God. From that there can be growth toward a fuller understanding of the Gospel.

2. God is All-Present (24b)

Paul tells the philosophers that God doesn't exist in shrines. "Our God is in the heavens; he does as he pleases" (Ps 115:3).

3. God is Self-Sufficient (25)

Paul reminds them that God sustains everything. God does not need us; but we do need him. Some live as though they are doing God a favor by coming to church or performing a religious duty; God doesn't need you. God is all-sufficient; you are insufficient without Him.

4. God is the Ruler of the Nations (26)

Paul sticks with this exclusive them. God is the Lord of the nations! God is Lord over where you live and all of life. You can feel the tension increasing in the hearers.

5. God is Knowable (27)

Paul says God is close. Therefore, seek the Lord while he may be found.

6. God is our Maker and Sustainer (28-29)

Paul quotes a sixth-century philosopher in Crete.

I am contingent. I don't have the power of being; but God does. Paul stresses this to his audience.

Life, motion, and being – all three are found in the self-existence of God. He is source and power behind.

7. God is the Judge (30a)

Paul reminds the philosophers that they should stop playing games, and come to grips with the judgment that is to come. God will judge everyone not partially or arbitrarily, but justly.

8. Jesus is God and Savior (30b-31)

Paul finally takes them to the Savior. All religions are not the same; that is evidenced in the fact that are God is alive and theirs is dead. “All Men” must repent because Jesus is the risen Lord.

“Raising Him from the Dead”—Paul always focuses on this doctrine. It is the ultimate apologetic in my opinion. What do you believe happened to the body of Jesus Christ? If he is risen from the dead, then that changes everything! If he is not risen, then our preaching is in vain; and you have listened to a long sermon for nothing!

It is important in our Gospel proclamation that we don't get sidetracked by matters that are not of eternal importance; who cares about dinosaurs or the age of the earth—make a big deal out of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ and urge people to repent.

LEAVE THE RESULTS TO GOD (32-34)

Paul gets three responses to his resurrection message: (1) Mockery; (2) Belief, and (3) the request to hear more later. I believe we too will get the same responses.

Some think Paul had a bad day; I think he did quite well in Athens. We sow the seed; God makes it grow.

Mark Dever shares the following story about how God takes the seed of the Gospel and makes it grow in his sovereign time . . .

It took a long time for Mr. Short. He was a New England farmer who lived to be one hundred years old. Sometime in the middle of the 1700's he was sitting his fields reflecting on his long life. As he did, “he recalled a sermon he had heard in Dartmouth [England] as a boy before he sailed to America. The horror of dying under the curse of God was impressed upon him as he meditated on the words he had heard so long ago and he was converted to Christ! Eighty-five years after hearing [John] Flavel preach” (Dever, 13-17.)

The preacher, John Flavel, had been a faithful evangelist 85 years earlier. He did not see fruit immediately. But his faithful, excuse-denying, evangelism led to a worshiper of Jesus Christ.

We plant the seed. Sometimes it falls on good ground. The question is “Will you be faithful to share this Gospel that has set you free from sin and death with people who desperately need it?” In the church, in the marketplace, in the center of ideas . . . proclaim the risen Christ, for he is the hope of the whole world.