

EXPOSITION OF ACTS

Message #40

Acts 17:16-34

One of the more interesting things that happened to us while we were on vacation is that my brother-in-law took us to an Italian restaurant in Palm Beach and there sitting right across from us was Jerry Seinfeld and his wife and children. One of the first thoughts that went through my mind was how do I share Jesus Christ with him. I didn't want to walk over to his table and interrupt his meal as some offensive and obnoxious religious zealot. So I prayed and asked God to give me wisdom. I formed a plan and thought through what I would say. My plan was if he uses the restroom, I will follow him in and say something to this effect. "Mr. Seinfeld we owe you a great debt of thanks. First, for your comedic thespian skills, and second, because you are Jewish and we all owe thanks to Israel for the Scriptures and Jesus Christ." Then I would have said, "I would encourage you to objectively and carefully examine the evidence that Jesus Christ is your Messiah and Savior because it is overwhelming." However, the opportunity did not present itself, because he did not use the restroom, so we just prayed for him and his family that they would trust Jesus Christ.

One of the things that impressed me as we were on vacation is that to witness effectively there is no set pattern you can use or follow. Each situation is unique to the individual and to the location.

The greatest church planter and church evangelist of the Church Age to communicate the Gospel was the Apostle Paul. As we track his ministry we discover that his message of justification by faith alone in Christ alone is always the same; however, the way he presents the message is not always the same. For example, in Philippi, we find him sitting out by a river on the Sabbath day sharing truth to a group of women (Acts 16:13). In Thessalonica he uses a more formal approach, almost a lecture type of approach in a synagogue for three straight Sabbath days (17:2). Now the scene changes; he is about to witness in Athens.

In this text, the Apostle Paul shares the truth of God with the intellectuals of the world in Athens. Athens was the cultural and intellectual center of the entire known world. The architecture of the city was impressive. It was a glorious city of the world. If one were a world class scholar or philosopher, this was the place you wanted to be. This city had been home to Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus and Zeno. This was the place where the brilliant minds of the world were known to call home. What we see here is this:

PAUL CAREFULLY PRESENTED JESUS CHRIST TO THE INTELLECTUALS OF ATHENS AND HIS PRESENTATION GENERATED A VARIETY OF RESPONSES.

Here is a blueprint for how to present the Gospel. There are eight historical facts revealed that tell the Athens story:

HISTORICAL FACT #1 – Paul was waiting for his team to meet him in Athens . **17:16a**

It is interesting that the account that opens up concerning this city of Athens really opens up with a focus on Paul and his missionary team. **Of all the so-called important people who had ever been in Athens or lived in Athens, Paul is the most significant visitor this city would ever have. Because the only man who really understood the truth of the grace of God was not the philosophers or educators, it was the Apostle Paul.** Although most didn't understand this point, Paul is the greatest man who ever walked in Athens and the story opens with Paul waiting for his team to join him in Athens.

It will be very interesting someday to see who the really important people of this city were. This city is known for names like Gilmore, Waldo, Stryker, Upjohn and Parfet. Those people should be honored because they gave many people jobs and paid them a good wage. But it will be interesting one day to see how God views it. His man Paul and Paul's team were the most important people in Athens.

HISTORICAL FACT #2 – Paul's spirit was provoked within him by all the idols in Athens.
17:16b

When Paul went to Athens it was a decadent city. As one commentator said, "its glory was fading fast." Petroneous said, "It was easier to find a god than a man in the city of Athens" (S. Lewis Johnson, *Acts 17:16-34*, p. 4).

Actually the name "Athens" was named after the goddess "Athena." So even the very name of the city was idolatrous. There were statues and idols to the Greek gods everywhere. It was a city given to idolatry. It was full of idols and full of places to worship. That is an interesting point because intellectualism often does lead to idolatry. It doesn't have to, but it often does.

Now when Paul saw this his spirit was "provoked" (παροξυνω). This particular Greek word means that Paul was emotionally stimulated in an angry type of way (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, pp. 346-347). Now the verb is passive. So what I understand this to mean is that God stirred Paul's mind to the point that he needed to say something.

HISTORICAL FACT #3 – Paul reasoned with the religious Jews and God-fearing Gentiles in the synagogue . **17:17a**

Paul headed straight for the synagogue to reason with them. That word "reason" means that Paul would carefully pick out things from Scripture and verbally presented them in a way that challenged these people's minds (*Ibid.*, p. 108). He wasn't just preaching or teaching; he was an apologist who was very carefully presenting the truth.

HISTORICAL FACT #4 – Paul reasoned with anyone present in the marketplace everyday.
17:17b

There is no evidence that Paul had this type of burden in every city that he visited, but he did in Athens. He was compelled by God to witness everyday. D.L. Moody was like that in Chicago. It is said that he tried to witness to someone every single day.

HISTORICAL FACT #5 – Paul witnessed to some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers,
preaching Jesus and His resurrection. **17:18**

Now don't overlook this point. Paul preached Jesus and His resurrection, which is so vital to justification. That is the message he preached. He preached salvation was found in one Person, Jesus Christ. He preached that to religious people and educated philosophers.

In the Bible, there are only two schools of philosophy ever named and both are named in this verse. What this shows us is that these two philosophies had taken over the academic world. Schools were not interested in the truth of God, but in secular philosophies that mean nothing.

The Epicurean school of philosophy was named after its founder "Epicurus" (342-270 B.C.). He taught that the greatest pursuit of life was pleasure. We call this philosophy "hedonism." The chief end and highest good of man was to live life free from pain and anxiety and pursue pleasure. Many in this country are right back to this Epicurean philosophy today. If it will pleasure you and if it feels good it is good. No restraints, no discipline, pursue pleasure.

We also have a new twist to this philosophy today and we call it self-esteem, which says live your life in a way that esteems yourself and keep away from things that cause you anxiety or any mental pain or strain. Don't talk about your sin or your need of cleansing, view yourself as basically good and pursue things that will prevent you from being anxious. Love yourself and esteem yourself. This is a new twist to the old Epicurean philosophy.

Stoicism was a philosophy founded by "Zeno" (340-265 B.C.). Stoicism taught that the greatest pursuit of life was to live as one with nature. Use your own abilities and reason and depend on yourself. It was kind of like an ancient mountain man philosophy. Live life for you and look out for yourself and don't let anything get you down.

Now Paul was preaching Jesus Christ to these philosophers and these philosophers called Paul an "idle babbling" (σπερμολογος). The Greek word means that they thought Paul was one who picked up various birdseeds of knowledge here and there and formed his own peculiar belief system. They saw Paul as some philosophical birdbrain who was communicating things that made no sense.

They specifically were taken with his message about Jesus being the God/man who had been raised from the dead. They had never heard a message that the only true God would be raised from the dead.

HISTORICAL FACT #6 – Paul was taken by the philosophers to the Areopagus to proclaim his message. **17:19-21**

Areopagus means “Hill of Ares,” which was the Greek god of war. The Romans called the god of war “Mars,” which explains why in some Bibles they translate this “Mars Hill.” Now the noun “Areopagus” refers to both a place and a people. Certain philosophical and religious and moral educators were known to meet at this spot to hear formal things. It was located about fifty yards from the Parthenon and it was a little hill about fifty feet high and 150 yards long. It was a place to debate things. So when we think of Paul being taken to the Areopagus, think of him being taken to a gathering of intellectuals who were in some way in some judicial charge of the city of Athens. In fact, today the name Areopagus refers to the Greek Supreme Court.

Notice **verse 21**, these Athenians loved to listen to lectures about various ideas, especially if those ideas were new. You may be certain that what Paul was proclaiming was brand new. So the motive for having Paul preach is not really wanting to know God, it is they want to know the latest fad.

HISTORICAL FACT #7 – Paul stood up and preached at the Areopagus. **17:22-31**

Here is the only recorded message of an apostle in the Bible that was preached to Gentiles. It is a fascinating message. He is going to take them right back to the book of Genesis. The message has an outline comprised of eight points:

(Message Point #1) - Paul begins by complimenting them on being very religious. **17:22**

Now the truth is almost all people who will end up in hell will have been religious people. So Paul is not about to stop with this point. It is true they were religious and he uses that as a basis for moving forward to present truth. There is nothing wrong with telling people that it is good they go to church; however, don't just stop there. Move forward and present Jesus Christ and the importance of being in a church that teaches the Scriptures. That is the kind of thing Paul does.

(Message Point #2) - Paul states that he knows the God they do not know. **17:23**

Paul says I noticed on my way into town that they had an altar to the unknown God that you don't know. Well Paul says, “I know this God.” R.C. Sproul says that he never argues with an atheist. What he says is this: “You know very well that God exists. Your problem isn't that you don't know God exists; your problem is that you can't stand Him” (*Acts*, p. 311).

(Message Point #3) - Paul proclaims that the true God is the Creator of all things. **17:24**

Now Paul is going to specify truth about the one true God. The one true God that I know and you don't know is the creator of all things. He starts by doing away with any polytheism that suggests there are multiple deities.

(Message Point #4) - Paul proclaims that God is the Sustainer of all things that are alive.
17:25

The one true God that I know that you don't know is the sustainer of all things and He doesn't need anything. In fact, He is the one who gives all life and breath and all things to people. This world still hasn't figured out that it is God who gives life to every baby. Our children go to schools where they are taught that their life developed by some chance collision of atoms. Their life came from God.

(Message Point #5) - Paul proclaims that God is the Creator of all nations and their places of habitation. **17:26**

This would have been a real blow to the ego of the thinking of the Athenians who thought they were the only civilized people in the world. They thought of all others as barbarians. Paul says God is the creator of all people who live in all places all over the world.

(Message Point #6) - Paul proclaims that God's sovereignty should cause all people of all nations to seek a relationship with Him. **17:27-28**

God is responsible for our life, our movement and our existence. In fact, even the Greek poets mentioned this truth about God. Since there is one true creator and one true sustainer who controls everything, this is the God everyone needs to have a relationship with.

(Message Point #7) - Paul proclaims that all idolatry is illogical thinking. **17:29**

If all life comes from one true God, it is completely illogical to worship something that is made of gold, silver or stone. Why in the world would you worship some image invented by the art and mind of a man, when there is one true God? **The great problem with most people is they want to shape a deity in their own image that fits their thinking.** It is totally illogical.

(Message Point #8) - Paul proclaims that all people are sinners in need of repentance in view of pending judgment of God through Jesus Christ. **17:30-31**

Now the government of our country gives all freedom of religion, but God does not. He demands that all people change their thinking about God and having a relationship with Him and that they believe in Jesus Christ.

God demands repentance. Dr. Sproul said this is not an invitation to come to Christ; this is a divine subpoena to believe in Him or else face severe judgment (*Ibid.*, p. 317).

Paul says to these philosophers that you had better think of life beyond this existence, because there will come a day of judgment. There is a God/man who will judge. By the way, there is one who will judge and it is not Muhammad or Buddha or Joseph Smith; it is Jesus. Jesus is the God/judge.

Men are all sinners and now that Christ has gone to the cross, they need to change their thinking about this point.

The proof that Jesus Christ is the only Savior is the resurrection. Jesus Christ changes everything. It comes down to this point; Jesus Christ is the Divine judge and the only way to be saved is by faith in Him.

HISTORICAL FACT #8 – Paul saw mixed responses to his preaching and teaching. **17:32-34**

There were three main responses:

Response #1 - Some mocked . **17:32a**

The word “sneer” (χλευαζω) is one that means some mocked and jeered making jest of what he said (*Ibid.*, p. 482). They laughed and thought he was some religious nut who was out of his mind.

Response #2 - Some wanted hear him again . **17:32b-33**

There is no evidence that they ever did get to hear Paul again. **Verse 33** says Paul went out of their midst and Acts 18:1 says he left Athens. So this was their one opportunity to hear Paul and respond to him. By the way, there is no evidence that a church was ever formed in Athens.

Response #3 - Some believed . **17:34**

One man who believed was Dionysius and a woman who was Damaris. Some immediately responded to the grace Gospel and to the teaching of the Apostle Paul. They joined right in with him.

There are four key lessons to learn here:

- 1) It is tricky business being a good witness for Jesus Christ. Each situation is different.
- 2) We need to depend on God’s Spirit to lead us and we need to carefully think through our presentation to gear it to our audience.
- 3) Our presentation must always bring people to Jesus Christ and the fact that they may only have a relationship with God through faith in Him.
- 4) When we witness we will see different results.