

Confrontation of a Worldview

Acts 17:16-34

Reading: **Acts 17:23-25 Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it—he is Lord of heaven and earth—does not live in shrines made by hands. ²⁵ Neither is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives everyone life and breath and all things.**

Intro:

Recap: Paul's has been forced out of Thessalonica, received in Berea by the locals, but foreigners from Thessalonica leading to Paul's escape to Athens. Jesus turns culture on its head, upsetting the apple cart if you will, and last week our ability to study the scriptures bring God into focus. This week we affirm the rational and reasonable foundation our faith has. From the outset God has positioned our faith to confront worldviews.

Main Point: Confronting a worldview requires confidence in who God is.

TS:

1. The Gospel belongs in the marketplace of ideas.

Acts 17:16-21 ¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed when he saw that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with those who worshiped God, as well as in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also debated with him. Some said, “What is this ignorant show-off trying to say?”

Others replied, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign deities”—because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

¹⁹ They took him and brought him to the Areopagus, and said, “May we learn about this new teaching you are presenting?” ²⁰ Because what you say sounds strange to us, and we want to know what these things mean.” ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners residing there spent their time on nothing else but telling or hearing something new.

Paul is not an idle man. Instead of sitting and waiting for Silas and Timothy, Paul continues his mission to the gentiles, sharing the Gospel in Athens. He was compelled to preach because of the aggravation in his soul at the sight of the cities idols. Starting in the synagogue, he reasoned with his Jewish brethren and the God worshipping Gentiles about Jesus, but his orations spill over into the marketplace. Our possible conception of Paul's efforts might equate to street corner preaching, which it is, yet in his day, the marketplace was the center of the city. It was more than buying and selling goods; people gathered to discuss politics, religion, and philosophy. Paul and many others before and after him came to present their philosophies, which was Athenian entertainment.

Paul did not ask for permission to present his case for Christ. He stands at the steps of the marketplace and begins orating the Gospel of Jesus and his resurrection. All too often, I get a sense from within my mind or in the life of church members that our argument for God and his Gospel somehow can't contend in the academic world around us. Let me for a moment argue that Paul's actions here in Athens affirm that God's Gospel from the very beginning of its proclamation began as an accredited academic belief.

Athens was no longer a powerful and splendid city from the golden era of Greek hegemony. However, it had retained its cultural, religious, and philosophical significance after Rome's conquest of the Peloponnese. It was the academic heart of the Eastern Mediterranean, if not the whole empire, and Paul was in his element. Academics were his people. He was born in Tarsus, reared, and educated in Jerusalem. The university in Tarsus taught stoic philosophy and, while in Jerusalem, he was top of his class in the elite school of Gamaliel. Paul had PhDs. How did the philosophers receive him?

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“What is this this ignorant show off saying” the literal translation calls him a "seed-pecker"; our equivalent might be a “bird brain,” yet regardless of what they call him, his message is making headway; they long to hear more. Dismissing the man would be easy, but his ability to reason with the city's elites provided evidence for the Gospel's ability to hang rationally and philosophically. That should not be a surprise, but we easily forget the God of creation is the foundation for logic and reason.

Despite being an ignorant show-off, the sufficiency of his argument for Jesus and the resurrection granted him access to the Areopagus.

2. The Gospel contextualizes to culture.

Acts 17:22-23 ²² Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said, “People of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect. ²³ For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed, ‘To an Unknown God.’ Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.

The Areopagus, or Mars Hill, is a literal location within the city of Athens. However, the name of the area came to represent the ruling council of Athens. The philosophers, professors, students, and the city's aristocracy would debate and argue routinely. And for many, this was their highest form of entertainment. Paul's invitation to speak before the Areopagus is a significant sign the Gospel is making headway into the Gentile world. For example, what the Grand Ol' Opry is to country music, the Areopagus was to philosophy and religion. You know you've arrived if you could present on the biggest stage.

Paul may be an “ignorant show-off” in their eyes but cannot deny his words. Why, because apart from the man the **message has merit**. The gospel doesn't need anything from us to make it reasonable, however God has equipped us with the ability to contextualize the message to those we are around. Paul delivers what he has received contextualized for Athens.

- **Paul demonstrates knowledge of his audience's beliefs.** “I see you are extremely religious.” Please don't equate this to flattery, for they would have looked down on such a persuasive opening. Paul is stating the fact that they are religious.
- **Paul accepts their beliefs but does not approve them.** Jeff conveyed this point a couple of weeks ago. I saw you have an altar to an unknown God; let me share him with you. Paul is not co-opting that altar as good. Instead, he uses as a beachhead for his gospel invasion into their thinking.

Where is our Areopagus? Where is our "marketplace" to trade ideas, beliefs, philosophies? They are certainly in the universities, in capitol buildings, but I would argue for most of us if not all, those areas are not within our realm of possibility. So, let's refine our question to the scope we find ourselves. Where is our Areopagus or our Marketplace? **It is on driveways, over fences, at soccer fields, bars, coffee shops, salons, in a barber's chair, and workplaces.**

The Gospel of Jesus can find a beachhead in any culture, but it takes the evangelist (You and me) to know our audience and accept the people where they are. Then, like Paul, we bring them to three fundamental questions:

3. Is there a God, does he speak, and what does that mean for me?

Paul's address is nothing short of a theological wonder. In a quick couple of sentences, he presents God succinctly and man's relationship to him firmly. In relation to these questions, Paul already knows the answer to the first. Yes, these people believe in divine beings but the wrong god. To the second question they believe the gods speak through oracles, but know nothing of God's special revelation.

- **God is the Self-Sufficient Creator**

Acts 17:24-25 ²⁴ **The God who made the world and everything in it—he is Lord of heaven and earth—does not live in shrines made by hands.** ²⁵ **Neither is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives everyone life and breath and all things.**

Everything that exists is because of him who created it, and he is alone sustains it without the need to be supported by it. He pushes back on any notion that temples or human worship bring anything to God as a transactional relationship. Aspects of Greek religious life saw the people appeasing the gods to get what they need, and the gods supplied humanity with things so they could get the worship/adoration they required.

- **God is the Sovereign Lord**

Acts 17:26 ²⁶ **From one man he has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live.**

As the creator, he has the right to rule and govern his creation as the only sovereign king. The existence of humanity over the whole earth establish by his decree are signs of his authority. By extension, therefore, he creates good from bad, right from wrong, and as we'll see in a moment, expects his creation to abide under his rule. **God cares happens because he is a relational God.**

- **God is Relational**

Acts 17:27-28 ²⁷ **He did this so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.** ²⁸ **For in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also his offspring.'**

God is not, as the Stoics believed, far off. Uninterested in the day-to-day happenings of earth. No, God is present in his creation, and we can know him. **Notice the subtle change in the argument. He moves from the nations to the individual.** This Sovereign Lord governs the nations, and yet, the knowledge of him is personal. There is a God, he speaks, and he

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can be known. Within Paul's description of reaching out, there is a subtle connotation of it being in the dark, clearly attributing the effects of sin blurring the mind to God's presence and suppressing the desire to acknowledge him as God.

Paul's use of Aratus' (315-240 b.c.) poem is not an endorsement of his beliefs but a bridge of commonality due to general revelation. Paul uses what he can to parley the core tenants of the Gospel into people's lives. We are made in the image of this God, sustained by this God, and answer to this God.

If Paul addressed atheists instead of a religious crowd, would he have used the same statements and evidence? Probably not, Paul departs from his usual approach, reasoning from the scriptures that Jesus is both Lord and Messiah. Because the Greeks do not know and might not care what the Old Testament says, it is reasonable to determine that Paul's approach changed depending on the crowd. Are we contextualizing the core questions to our culture? Is there a God, does he speak, and what does that mean for me?

Jeffs class on Wednesday nights in the fall. Foundations of Christian Thought
My class on Sundays in the fall. Foundations of the Gospel.

4. The Gospel proclamation is not complete without repentance.

Acts 17:29-31 ²⁹ Since, then, we are God's offspring, we shouldn't think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image fashioned by human art and imagination.

³⁰ "Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."

Paul boldly presents the reasonableness of our faith before scholars and politicians, and then boldly calls them to repent. His boldness is not merely innate to his character or nature; instead, his confidence is rooted in the rational and productive nature of what he believes. Let's examine his conclusion.

Remember what agitated his spirit in the begging. The amount of idol worship entrenched in the city is folly and rebellion compared to the infinite, personal creator of the universe. *If we are offspring of the divine, with souls and spirits, why would we worship manufactured things without soul, mind, and heart?* The philosophers agreed that man possessed a soul yet differed on what happened to that soul after death. The stoics believed it continues the Epicurean believe the soul died with the body. Paul asserts wrong is being done against God when man worships things that are less than us as if they were God. God is now removing ignorance as an excuse for their treason.

Paul presents the proper response to rebellion, repentance. A simple call to turn and walk in the other direction. This is the most challenging aspect of our charge to share the Gospel, calling people to repent. Asking people to repent is a relational cliff. We don't know what happens after that. Will the relationship end? Will I be kept at arm's length? What will they say? Paul's consideration is not upon their reaction but on the urgency of God's looming judgment.

Proof of Paul's decree is the resurrection of Jesus. The one who is appointed to judge the world and subdue its rebellion. At this point, Paul is laughed out of the room. The resurrection is the final straw that they reject.

Acts 17:32-34 ² When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some began to ridicule him, but others said, "We'd like to hear from you again about this." ³³ So Paul left their presence. ³⁴ However, some people joined him and believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them

It seems familiar, doesn't it? From the beginning of the Gospel, the resurrection remains foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews. Yet we ask, did Paul fail? No not at all. Paul became all things to all people that he might win some.

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Borrowing from Jeff's sermon two weeks ago, let's examine Paul's example.

- **We seek to understand and to be understood.**
- **We insist on respectful dialog over contested matters of faith.**
- **We distinguish between acceptance and approval.**
- **We seek to build rapport, and we resist isolationism.**
- **We advocate for the interests of our sending country.**
- **We establish credibility through an accurate and informed critique of others.**