

Paul Visits Athens and Addresses the Areopagus

Acts 17:16-34

Acts 17:16-34: *“Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. ¹⁷ Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there.*

¹⁸ *Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, “What does this babbler want to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,” because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.*

¹⁹ *And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak?” ²⁰ For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean.” ²¹ 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.*

²² *Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; ²³ 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. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you. ²⁴ “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. ²⁵ Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. ²⁶ And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, ²⁷ 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; ²⁸ 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.’*

²⁹ *Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising. ³⁰ Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, ³¹ because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”*

³² *And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, “We will hear you again on this matter.” ³³ So Paul departed from among them. ³⁴ However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.”*

Background Notes

Acts 17 mentions three cities visited by the apostle Paul and the team on Paul's second missionary journey: Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens. Each of these cities had a different reaction to the gospel. At Thessalonica, the unbelieving Jews were openly hostile and became jealous when a number of Jews and Gentiles believed. At Berea, there was a much more receptive attitude in the synagogue. In fact, verse 11 says that they were more fair-minded or more "noble" than the Thessalonian Jews. Why? Because they eagerly received the Word – and then they searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether Paul's teachings were true. As a result, many in Berea believed. There was no opposition at Berea until the unbelieving Jews from Thessalonica arrived, dogging the steps of the apostle Paul, and stirred up a hostile crowd.

In Athens, reaction to Paul's teaching was completely different than his reception at Berea. In Athens he was confronted with indifference, skepticism, and ridicule. Only a relatively few people became believers, and it appears that no church was formed.

Three different cities with different reactions. We, too, will find different reactions to the presentation of the gospel today – hostility, indifference, skepticism, ridicule - but also openness and reception. In many situations we will find all of these various reactions. What do we do when we meet with negative reactions to our preaching and sharing and witnessing? We do exactly what the apostle Paul did – we keep the faith! We just keep plugging along, and we depend on the Lord to open the doors for positive responses to our witness. Our responsibility is to be a good witness.

Doctrinal Points

1. A good witness shares with everyone.

When Paul came to Athens, he went first to the synagogue, as was his custom. He reasoned with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, based on the Old Testament Scriptures. But Paul did not confine his witness to this ready-made audience in the synagogue. He also went to the marketplace, and witnessed there to anyone who happened to be present and would listen to him. Verse 17: *"Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there."* This was street-corner evangelism. Paul witnessed to everyone!

When you witness to everyone, you're bound to come across a few philosopher-types. This was the case with the apostle Paul in Athens. Verse 18: *"Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, 'What does this babbling want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,' because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection."* The Epicureans taught that pleasure was the chief end of life, and there are certainly a lot of Epicureans around today. Paul witnessed to the Epicureans. The Stoic philosophers were pantheistic in their thinking. They emphasized that people should be in total control over their emotions, and therefore unmoved by either pleasure or pain. Paul witnessed to the Stoics.

Paul witnessed to everyone, even though some Athenians ridiculed him and called him a babbler, while others said that he proclaimed strange deities. In spite of this verbal abuse, Paul continued to witness to everyone. A good witness shares with everyone.

2. A good witness looks for common ground.

When Paul was brought to speak before the Areopagus, he looked for something of common interest so that he could be a witness there as well. The Areopagus was a government council in charge of religious and educational matters. They met on the hill near the Acropolis named after the Greek god Ares. In fact, the Greek word “*areopagus*” means Hill of Ares, or Mars Hill (Mars was the Roman name of the Greek god Ares). You can stand on Mars Hill today and get a good view of the many of the ruins of ancient Athens.

Paul looked for a point of contact with the Athenians where he could begin his witness, and he found it. While making the rounds of the city, he had seen an altar with the inscription: “*To the unknown god.*” Paul used this inscription as a jumping-off point to begin his witness of the one true God.

Then Paul moved to the common ground of creation: “*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.*” At this point I imagine Paul gestured toward the Parthenon, the beautiful temple to the goddess Athena, situated atop the nearby Acropolis. “*Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.*” Paul was using the Causal Argument for the existence of God: you can’t get something from nothing. There must be a *cause* for every effect, and that *cause must be greater than its effect*. If there is life and breath, then the cause must be a living Creator.

In witnessing, you can always find common ground with the causal argument. Just talking about the origin of this natural world in general is common ground. This is called general revelation, and it declares the glory of God. Psalm 19:1: “*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows His handiwork.*”

Then Paul moved on to the common ground of the origin of different people and nations. Even the Athenians could agree that the various nations pointed back to a beginning with one man and one woman. This certainly was evidence of a Creator, and therefore we are His offspring. There is the causal argument again!

Paul even used the common ground of quotations from their own Greek poets to back up his argument. He concluded this part of his address by saying that it was just not logical to worship the God who created everything, including people, with images that we create ourselves from metal or stone! That’s really not logical; in fact, it’s ignorant.

Finally Paul moved on to the gospel, but the point here is that he started his address to the pagan Athenians with the common ground of “origins.” You can always find some kind of common ground with anyone. A good witness looks for common ground.

3. A good witness moves on to the gospel.

Paul did not stop with the common ground of creation and general revelation. He moved on to “special revelation” – the fact that each person is held accountable for his or her sin, and that there will be a day of judgment, and there was proof of what he was preaching in that a certain Man was raised from the dead.

Paul certainly must have shared more details of the gospel than what is recorded here, because the last verse of the chapter says that some people became believers: *“However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.”* The point here is that in our witness, we must move on to the gospel as Paul did. We can’t just talk about the wonders of creation and other common ground subjects. Evangelism does not take place until a person hears and understands the gospel. A good witness moves on to the gospel.

Practical Application

Are you willing to be called a babbler?

“And some said, “What does this babbler want to say?” Have you ever been called a babbler? The word that is translated as “babblers” here means “seed picker.” They were accusing Paul of picking up little bits of truth and knowledge here and there and putting his own spin on them. A babblers was a word of ridicule and scorn. Let me tell you, those men are not sneering now.

Because of Paul’s view of eternal realities and truth and service to the Lord, he didn’t stop witnessing. What about us? Do we get discouraged and stop talking about our faith when we’re ridiculed?

The Old Testament prophets were ridiculed too. Hosea 9:7 says, *“The prophet is a fool, the spiritual man is insane because of the greatness of your iniquity and great enmity.”* The spiritual and immoral conditions in Israel during Hosea’s day were so bad that godly people, and the true prophets who were inspired by God, were considered fools and out of their minds. Because the people were involved in gross iniquity, the prophets and God-fearing people who spoke up for the Lord appeared to be crazy babblers.

This is true today in many areas of society. Christian students who dare to stick with biblical truth and moral standards on the secular campus are often considered to be delusional. Christian writers who take the Christian worldview in secular publications are dismissed as ignorant. This is tough to take, and many Christians hide their faith as a result. Let me ask you - are you willing to be called a babblers?