

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Witnessing To Other Worldviews

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Acts 17:16-34

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Introduction:

Good morning, Redeemer and Simcoside! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 17.

In our text for today, we find the Apostle Paul sharing the gospel in the famous city of Athens. I am so thankful that Luke recorded this example for us because the people of Athens actually sound a lot like the people of Orillia. Granted, we don't see temples and idols lining our city streets. But talk to the average person and you will quickly discover that each person you speak with likely has a different understanding of who God is. In our city right now, you will find people who hold to Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Islam – to name a few. That's to say nothing of all the people who would hesitate to identify with any one of those religions, but who nevertheless would self-identify as "spiritual" people.

Twenty years ago, if you were to go out and evangelize in Orillia you could expect that most people would know which God you were talking about, and they would have a vague familiarity with the gospel. As we evangelize today, we can't take that familiarity for granted. We will often find ourselves witnessing to people who hold to other worldviews. In our passage this morning, we find a powerful example of how to do just that.

To that end, look with me to Acts 17. We will be reading from verse 16 to the end of the chapter. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbling wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually 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 indeed his offspring.’

²⁹ Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. ³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

³² Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.”³³ So Paul went out from their midst. ³⁴ But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them. (Acts 17:16-34 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

As I mentioned, in these verses, we find a practical example of how to minister to people whose worldview is entirely distinct from the Judeo-Christian worldview. So, let's look at this example that's been recorded for us and let's learn:

How To Witness To Other Worldviews

First, we learn from Paul's example that we should:

1. Recognize the need

If you can't follow Paul's example in verse 16 then you won't follow his example in any of the verses that follow. Look there again with me:

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, **his spirit was provoked within him** as he saw that the city was full of idols. (Acts 17:16 ESV)

As Paul made his way through Athens, he saw a multitude of temples devoted to the worship of false gods. He saw streets that were literally lined with idols. An ancient historian named Pliny recounts that there were more than 73,000 statues in the city of Athens!¹

Now, the average visitor to the city would have found this to be captivating. "The mythology! The history! What a sight to behold!"

But Paul was no tourist. And these idols were not attractions. They were false gods! Countless lost people were looking to these blocks of stone for hope, but there was no hope to be found!

An entire city of men and women and boys and girls stood before Paul. People who were created in the image of God to know Him and to love Him and to enjoy Him; people who owed their very *existence* to God; people who couldn't draw a single *breath* apart from His sustaining power! And yet, they did not praise Him. They did not *know* Him. They gave the worship He deserved to lifeless stones.

It broke Paul's heart.

Can I tell you something? We will never share the gospel in this city until it breaks our hearts too.

¹ "Pliny reckons that in his day the city of Rhodes had 73,000 statues, with "no fewer" in Athens and in the temple cities of Olympia and Delphi" Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 722.

We are surrounded by lost and dying people who are deceived. Deceived by false prophets. Deceived by false promises. Deceived, and on a road that leads to eternal death. In the same way that the false gods in Athens had no power to save the Athenians, neither do the false gods in Orillia have the power to save Orillians. Islam cannot save. Buddhism cannot save. Hinduism cannot save. And I know that a statement like that makes Canadians squeamish, but we can't say otherwise because Jesus said:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. **No one comes to the Father except through me.**
(John 14:6b ESV)

Apart from faith in Jesus, the men and women in our city will die in their sin. If you don't see that – if you *won't* see that – if that reality doesn't *provoke your spirit* – then you can tune the rest of this sermon out, because you'll never bother witnessing to the world. You'll spend your life collecting money, and maintaining your image while the world perishes around you.

But not Paul. Paul recognized the need. It stirred him. And then he spoke, which leads us to our second lesson. If you want to witness to other worldviews, then you need to:

2. Start the conversation

When Paul saw the brokenness, he didn't find a quiet room where he could wallow. He got up and he went to work! We read in verse 17:

So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace **every day** with those who happened to be there. (Acts 17:17 ESV)

Paul marched into the synagogue, and then out into the streets and he shared the message of the gospel with anyone who would listen. And he did this EVERY DAY!

Do you want to make a difference in this city? Then make evangelism a *daily* habit. I am convicted as I say this because I need to grow in this area myself. Jesus told us to *scatter the seed of the gospel* but, in our North American approach, we often spend an entire YEAR coaching ourselves and strategizing in order to throw ONE!

Paul threw the seed of the gospel EVERYWHERE! Day after day, wherever he went, Paul started the conversation. And verse 18 tells us what Paul's conversations were about:

he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. (Acts 17:18b ESV)

That's our message. Plain and simple. Do your neighbours know about Jesus? Do they know that he died for the sins of the world and that he rose again from the dead? Do they know that everyone who repents and places their trust in Jesus will have resurrection life? Well, if they're living next to you, they SHOULD! ALL of Paul's neighbours did!

This isn't to say that all of Paul's neighbours *believed* that. All of his neighbours *heard* the gospel, but most thought that it was absurd. We read in verse 18:

Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "**What does this babbler wish to say?**" (Acts 17:18a ESV)

Athenians prided themselves on being intellectuals. This was Athens, after all! Socrates himself once debated in these streets! These philosophers saw Paul's message as anti-intellectual. They referred to him as a "babbling" which comes from a Greek word that describes birds gathering up seeds from various places. The gist of the insult was that Paul was simply stealing ideas from other sources and cobbling together his pea-brained worldview.² Essentially, these philosophers were slinging the same insults that Christian high school and university students are being slammed with today.

And that makes sense, because their view of life was not all that different from the way that men and women view the world today. On the one hand, you had the Epicureans who held that:

pleasure was the chief goal of life, with the pleasure most worth enjoying being a life of tranquility free from pain, disturbing passions, superstitious fears, and anxiety about death.³

The Epicureans essentially said: "Find the path of least resistance. Live and let live. Do whatever you need to do to be happy and to find pleasure in life." Do you have any neighbours who think that way?

The other side of the spectrum were the Stoics. As one commentator explains:

² "On "babbling" the interpretation "third-rate intellectual devoid of method" seems appropriate." Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 726.

³ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelein, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 473-474.

They stressed the importance of Reason as the principle which was inherent in the structuring of the universe and by which men ought to live... their ethics stressed individual self-sufficiency and obedience to the dictates of duty.⁴

The Stoics essentially said: “Nothing is more important than logic and reason! THAT is the secret to living a noble life. Be a good person. Be a good member of society.” Doesn’t that describe all the neighbours that the first description didn’t describe? Athens was dominated by pleasure seekers and virtue signalers. There is nothing new under the sun.

Yet, day after day, Paul went out into this city where they dismissed his preaching. Day after day he proclaimed the gospel. And eventually, we read in verse 19:

And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? (Acts 17:19 ESV)

The Areopagus – or Mars Hill – was the place in Athens where ideas were tested and tried. Paul had officially started the conversation. And that leads us to our third lesson. Once you’ve started the conversation, if you want to witness to other world views, then you need to:

3. Find common ground

Just listen to the masterful way that Paul addresses this group. We read in verse 22:

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, **I perceive that in every way you are very religious.** (Acts 17:22 ESV)

It would have been easy for Paul to have come out with guns blazing. They had – after all – called him a “babbling.” Paul could have intellectually DESTROYED these listeners!

But he didn’t. Because Paul wasn’t trying to win an argument. He was trying to win a CITY. He was trying to win worshippers for God.

So, he came in tactfully.

⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 284.

As an aside, is there anything more foreign in our public discourse right now than this? Paul didn't misrepresent his opponents. He didn't cast them in the worst possible light. He didn't put them down so as to build up his platform. He spoke with unapologetic clarity, but it was noticeably marked by *kindness*. As we witness to our city, let that be true of our witness as well.

Let's jump back in not at verse 23:

For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.' **What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.** (Acts 17:23 ESV)

Isn't that brilliant? Paul took the time to observe the city, and he found an altar to the unknown god. Paul recognized an opportunity here and he seized upon it. As a wise old preacher once said:

From every system of false religion there is an open door into the true.⁵

Hear that this morning. Because we believe that all truth is God's truth, we should look at the culture and the religions around us *expecting* to find glimpses of the truth! It will often be buried under a structure of thinking that is inconsistent and false, but there IS truth and goodness to be found! If you look ahead to verse 28, you can see that Paul even quotes from popular Greek poets:

“‘In him we live and move and have our being’;

as even some of your own poets have said,

“‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ (Acts 17:28 ESV)

The Athenians were wrong about a lot of things, but before Paul got there, he wanted to highlight that there were some things that they had gotten right. “We ARE His offspring! Children of God! That is who we are! You're right! In Him we live and move and have our being! Yes, and amen! We can't do ONE THING apart from Him! You're right!” From there – from this common ground – Paul was able to work with the Athenians and to move them in the direction of the truth.

⁵ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 425-426.

By way of application, can I challenge you this morning? Keep your eyes open to find things in our culture that are good and noble. I have some neighbours that are selfless and generous – that’s common ground. I can commend that! I have some unbelieving family members who are passionate about human rights and justice – that’s common ground! Find the areas of agreement – the things that you can affirm and commend – and start the conversation there.

Then, having identified this common ground, Paul proceeded to:

4. Establish a foundation

Remember, Paul was preaching to a group of people who believed that there were countless gods in the universe. If Paul had just jumped to, “Jesus died to satisfy the wrath of God against your sin” then this group likely would have just nodded along. “Here’s one more story about one more sacrifice to one more god.” Their thinking about “god” was wildly distorted! Paul needed to do some ground level, foundational work before they would be ready to hear anything else.

This was true in Athens, and it is true today in Orillia. If people don’t have a right understanding of who God is, then we are never going to get anywhere in our evangelism! Obedience doesn’t make sense if we don’t believe that God is the Creator of the world. Sin doesn’t make sense if we don’t believe that God is holy. The cross doesn’t make sense if we don’t believe that God is just.

A. W. Tozer famously wrote:

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.⁶

That’s exactly right. So, that’s where Paul begins with his listeners. You might even classify Paul’s sermon here as *pre-evangelism*. He’s laying a foundation. We’re going to need to learn how to do this, so let’s look closely at the example in front of us here. Paul tells them in verse 24:

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man (Acts 17:24 ESV)

⁶ A.W. Tozer as quoted by R. Albert Mohler Jr. *The Apostle's Creed - Discovering Authentic Christianity in an Age of Counterfeits* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2019), 3.

Paul's listeners didn't know anything about the true God. He's starting from scratch here, and he begins by telling his listeners that:

God is Creator

God is Lord of heaven and earth

God is not contained in temples

Here, Paul is helping the Athenians to recognize the TRANSCENDENCE of the God that they have been ignoring. He cannot be contained in a temple... He is the Creator of the UNIVERSE! Therefore, He is LORD of everything! Not like the Greek gods who were lords of the sea, or of war, or of love – no, God is Lord of ALL. Paul goes on to say in verse 25:

nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. (Acts 17:25 ESV)

Here, Paul explains that:

God is Self-sufficient

The theological term for this is the aseity of God. God doesn't need us. He doesn't need sacrifices. He doesn't need praise. God is not dependent upon us. He is SO sufficient, in fact, that He made us to enjoy the overflow of His goodness and His generosity! God is a GIVER, not a taker. Paul goes on in verses 26-27:

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place,²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us (Acts 17:26-27 ESV)

Here, Paul teaches his listeners that:

God is not localized

God is not hiding

Our God is not simply the God of Israel. He is Lord of EVERY nation! He Created the first man long before we drew our geopolitical lines, and He is the sustainer of every people group – even those who have forgotten Him.

And He is not hiding. Paul would later write in his letter to the believers in Rome:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. **So they are without excuse.** (Romans 1:19-20 ESV)

This is why every continent is filled with people who recognize the existence of a god. As G. Campbell Morgan explains:

Every idol proved capacity for God.⁷

God is not hiding. He speaks! In the past he spoke through the prophets, but in these last days He has revealed Himself most fully through the sending of His Son into the world⁸. And after sending His Son, He sent His Spirit to empower the church to bear witness! Our God has declared:

You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. (Jeremiah 29:13 ESV)

Paul included ALL of that in his pre-evangelism because Paul understood that the foundation was critically important. Here is a clear point of application for us: When we go out and share the gospel in this city, one of the most important questions we need to ask is: “Who do you think God is?” Because what a person believes about God matters! As I mentioned at the beginning, twenty years ago you could assume that most people in our city – whether they believed in Him or not – had a base understanding of the Christian God. You just can’t assume that anymore. There are countless worldviews represented in our city and countless ideas about God. Therefore, as we witness to other worldviews, we will need to establish a foundation. And having done that, finally, we learn from this example that we need to:

⁷ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 418-419.

⁸ Hebrews 1:1-4.

5. Tell the truth

Look again at verses 28-31:

as even some of your own poets have said,

“‘For we are indeed his offspring.’

²⁹ Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. ³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, **but now he commands all people everywhere to repent**, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:28b-31 ESV)

Paul began on common ground, but he didn't end there, did he? While it is important for us to look for things that we can affirm in the culture around us, we also need to resolve to tell the truth.

And the truth that the Athenians needed to hear was that their days of worshiping idols were days of ignorance. Paul essentially argues, “You *know* this! If you are God's offspring – if He *made* you – then you can't *make* Him! So, why are you worshiping statues of gold and silver and stone? You called ME a babbler? This is evidence of *your* ignorance. The day is coming when you will stand and be judged by the God who made you. Therefore, you need to repent.”

That's a sharp turn in the conversation, isn't it? I'll come right out and say it: This is the hardest part of witnessing to other worldviews. It feels unkind to call a person to repentance. It feels unkind to look them in the eye and to tell them that the gods that they have been worshipping are no gods at all. It feels unkind.

But if the gospel is true, then calling a person to repentance is the most loving thing you can do.

And that brings us back to where we began. Paul looked around him and saw happy men and women in their impressive city scurrying to false temples to make sacrifices to their false gods. And it PROVOKED his spirit! Because Paul believed the gospel!

There is one God. He is holy, just and righteous. We will all stand before Him one day, and we will all be judged for our sin. But our loving God sent His own Son – Jesus – to settle our debt and

to die in our place. Then, three days later, Jesus rose from the grave proving that sin and death have been conquered for those who are in Christ. He ascended to the right hand of the Father where he is reigning right now. The only way that we can share in that resurrection life – the only way that we can be brought back into right relationship with our Creator – is if we repent of our sin and place our trust in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul BELIEVED that gospel with all his heart! As Paul looked out at the Athenians, he loved them enough to tell them the truth – even when it made them feel uncomfortable. The text concludes:

³² Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.”³³ So Paul went out from their midst. ³⁴ But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them. (Acts 17:32-34 ESV)

Some mocked. Many tuned him out. But, while the message of salvation was laughed out of the Aeropogus by the intellectual elites, a man named Dionysius and a woman named Damaris were forever changed.

Just think about that for a moment – in that whole city of Athens, as Paul ministered for days in the synagogues, the streets and the Aeropogus, thousands of people would have heard the gospel. Paul threw that seed *everywhere!* Literally *thousands* of people thought he was a fool!

But two believed. Sometimes, in our witnessing, that’s the math. Throw a thousand seeds to see two sprouts. Paul was willing to give his life for that kind of outcome. He was ready and willing to be mocked and rejected by thousands in order to win a few. That is Christian love. If we want to be used by God to witness to the people around us, then we will need to possess that kind of love.

Love like that is a spiritual gift. We can’t simply muster it up. We need to receive it from Him. To that end, would you pray with me?