

## Know Your Neighbors

1 Peter 3:15

Prepared to Profess #2

**W**E continue our series focused on equipping us so that we can be PREPARED TO PROFESS THE TRUTH. Recall Peter's words in 1 Peter 3:15: **always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.** Last Sunday night we focused on the "who"—you—the "when"—**always**—and the "how"—with *spiritual preparation* honor[ing] **Christ the Lord in your hearts**, with *doctrinal preparation* mak[ing] a[n] ἀπολογία or a legal **defense**, and with *ethical demonstration* doing all this **with gentleness and...respect.** We ended a little abruptly with the "to whom"—**anyone**—so I want to return and focus for a few moments and with a few applications on this.

### "ANYONE" INCLUDES YOUR NEIGHBORS

The inference and application of **anyone** is that this includes your next door neighbors, the people you meet weekly at the gym, your kids' classmate's parents, etc. As I mentioned this morning, it's not for us to distinguish between people.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWING YOUR NEIGHBORS

Have you thought of how important it is to know what your neighbors believe and how they think so you can engage? Let me illustrate from two biblical examples.

First, go back to the Gospel of John chapter 4 and the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Note that Jesus is in a public place. Note also that he strikes up a conversation by asking for a drink. 19<sup>th</sup> century African-American preacher, Charles Octavius Boothe, said about small things like this: “We are not to try to decide what are little and what are great things in work for the salvation of men. A thing may seem to be little, but in the course of time it may lead on to very great results.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus’ question led to a lengthy conversation about sociological and theological concerns: Jews v. Samaritans, worship on Mount Zion v. Mount Gerazim.

There was a great article a couple of years ago in *The Atlantic* entitled, “Listening to Young Atheists: Lessons for a Stronger Christianity.” It applies here as the Samaritan woman—like so many today—have some knowledge of the Word. The article said, “Most of our participants had not chosen their worldview from ideologically neutral positions at all, but *in reaction* to Christianity.” They had attended church. What made them turn to atheism? *The mission and message of their churches was vague*: “These students heard plenty of messages encouraging ‘social justice,’ community involvement, and ‘being good,’ but they seldom saw the relationship between that message, Jesus Christ, and the Bible.” *They felt their churches offered superficial answers to life’s difficult questions*. “Serious-minded, they often concluded that church services were largely shallow, harmless, and ultimately

irrelevant.” On the other hand, *they expressed their respect for those ministers who took the Bible seriously.* Of note is that *ages 14–17 were decisive* and that *the decision to embrace unbelief was often an emotional one.*

Second, go to Acts 17 and Paul’s presentation before philosophers. Jesus and the apostles appealed to the Old Testament when they interacted with Jews or those like the Samaritans; but what about when interacting with non-Jewish unbelievers? While **waiting for** Silas and Timothy in Athens, Paul’s **spirit was provoked**, meaning, became jealous for the glory of God. Why? **He saw that the city was full of idols** (v. 16). Besides **reason[ing] in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons** (Jewish converts) he also engaged **in the marketplace** anyone who **happened to be there** (v. 17). It happened that **some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers...conversed with him** as they were shopping (v. 18). So they **brought him to the Areopagus** (v. 19), literally “the hill of Ares,” the Greek god of war, whose Roman name was Mars, hence “Mars Hill.” This was where the authoritative religious and moral assembly met.

#### Epicureans

- Goal of life: pleasure, brought about by tranquility, freedom from pain, using the passions of body.
- World not created; has no future but is in an eternal cycle.
- At death the soul evaporates.
- The gods took no interest in human life since they were transcendent.

#### Stoics

- Goal of life: live in harmony with nature.
- Live in dependence upon reason and self-sufficiency.
- God was the “world-soul” (*logos*) that was in everything as he was immanent.

Note *Paul's appeal* in verses 22–23: **“I perceive that in every way you are very religious”** as evidenced by their idols. Pliny said there were three thousand statues, which led another ancient writer, Petronius, to satirically say it was easier to find a god rather than a man in Athens!<sup>2</sup> Paul appeals to the inborn religious nature of man: all know God but all don't *know* him (Rom. 1). Even those who know nothing of Scripture are religious. Don't we hear, “Pray for surf?” What architectural clues show what religion our neighbors participate in? Giant sports stadiums for one!

Paul says *God is the Creator* (vv. 24–25). He doesn't prove the existence of God; he assumes it and appeals to the universal sense of divinity. As Creator he **does not live in temples made by man** (v. 24). This was important as the Epicureans said the world wasn't made but is eternal. Today's Big Bang theory says there always was a “singularity.” The Stoics said the divine was in everything. As the Creator and giver of life God is not **served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything** (v. 25). In contrast to the Epicureans: the gods took no care of us; in contrast to the Stoics: humans were self-sufficient. Paul also says *God is the Sustainer* (vv. 26–29). He appeals to the universal sense of solidarity as a human race: **he made from one man every nation of mankind** (v. 26). He appeals to the reality of nations rising and falling: **having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place** (v. 26). His

sustaining of life was for the purpose of leaving a witness of himself that we would **seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him** (v. 27). In contrast to the Epicureans Paul proclaimed the immanence of God. We need to learn from this that we should remind our unbelieving friends that all they have is a blessing from God they would not have apart from him. Paul even cites the pagan poets and philosophers his audience would have known in verses 27–28. Finally, Paul says *God is the Consummator* (vv. 30–31). The Epicureans said history was eternally cyclical; Paul says the world has a purpose that ends with God. There's more than *this* life or life is meaningless. Thus he called them to repent (v. 30) because a Day of Judgment is coming (v. 31). How do we know this? Jesus rose again (v. 31).

#### APPLICATION FOR ENGAGING YOUR NEIGHBORS

First, learn to listen to your neighbors on their terms; read literature; read websites; ask questions. Second, attempt to talk to your neighbors on their terms, especially if they are not biblically literate. Third, appeal to your neighbors' innate knowledge of God and their sense of right and wrong because his law is on their hearts. Fourth, rely on God's greatest argument of all: the resurrection of Jesus. I've mentioned before that my closest friend in college and seminary is now a professor of philosophy fallen from the Faith. Last time we talked I listened to all his uncertainty then told him one thing was: Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Octavius Boothe, *Plain Theology for Plain People*, Lexham Classics (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 81.

<sup>2</sup> [http://pages.pomona.edu/~cmc24747/sources/pet\\_satyr.htm](http://pages.pomona.edu/~cmc24747/sources/pet_satyr.htm)