

PAUL'S DIALOGUE WITH THE AREOPAGUS IN ACTS 17:16-34: PRESENTING ABSOLUTE TRUTHS TO A RELATIVISTIC WORLD

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Are we willing to be ridiculed as a “BABBLER” for the sake of the Gospel of Christ?

The Apostle Paul was willing to be ridiculed by the Athenians as he passionately presented the Gospel at the Areopagus. From Acts 17 we learn from Paul how we, too, can present the Gospel to a relativistic world, even one gripped by post-modernity as ours. Everywhere Paul went he knew that in this world there are only two types of people: those who worship the triune God and those who do not.

Presenting the Gospel to a world that is hurtling into the new millennium finds Christians facing the same challenge as the Apostle faced in ancient Athens. Our task is not to change the biblical message by making it palatable or acceptable to our society. To do so is to deny the life-changing power of the Word of God and it dishonors Him. Our challenge is how to present it so that it is understood, effective, and God glorifying.

We need WISDOM presenting the Gospel to our relativistic world of the 90's.

How do we then present the Gospel to our contemporaries? What methods do we employ to proclaim the love of Christ to those who think that there is no absolute truth? How can we relate to those who consider the claim of our Lord Jesus Christ as “the way, the truth and the life” as too exclusive or too dogmatic?

We may be tempted to answer this question lightly without planning any strategies. However, our text compels us to notice that the Apostle Paul, while waiting for his travel companions, appraised the city of Athens. He observed its people and customs and he became rather concerned about their spiritual condition. Acts 17:16 says: “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.¹ His passion arose and in this case to the point of indignation. We, too, must have this passionate fervor for those who are lost. Paul sets an excellent example of how to use this passion effectively. Observing the city enabled the Apostle-missionary to focus his preaching squarely on the spiritual need of the Athenians, their idolatry. The indication we get from the Greek word *paroxino* used in the text,² usually translated *provoked* or *stirred*, is that the Apostle was not merely moved to preach the Gospel to the Athenians from his observations of their city and culture. He was always ready to preach the Gospel, as we must be also. In Athens he was particularly moved by their idolatry. He had exchanges with the Athenian citizens in the market place daily. He visited the local synagogue where he also reasoned with the Jews. It is likely that Paul was aware of their reputation of being interested in the latest fad and theories, as Luke writes in verse 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.” While waiting for his travel

companions the Apostle Paul scrutinized Athens and its citizens and became familiar with their ideas.

The lesson here, for us who also preach the same message as the Apostle Paul did, is to know as much as we can about our contemporaries. We must stay alert to events and changes affecting their lives. We must make an effort to know what they think and discover how they think. We must be informed of what they say and discern what they mean by what they say. For this challenging task we need the wisdom that only God can give.

We need FAITHFULNESS presenting the Gospel to our relativistic world of the 90's.

We may be tempted also to change the content of the message in our presentation and yield to the pressures of our time. The popular refrain calling us to relativism centers on cultural relevance. The emphasis of our time is on marketing techniques in order to achieve success. Such emphasis is finding its way into Christian circles pressuring the Church to adapt to the user-friendly approach of our times. While it may be wise to observe cultural trends and to be prepared and formulate strategies, we must be ever faithful to the content of the message as we present the Gospel to the truth-denying man of our era. Our message is the same message that the Apostle preached in Athens and everywhere he went in his missionary journeys. The Apostle Paul did not change his message at each place he visited, as we may be tempted to do today, so that we may reach our contemporaries. Judging by what we read in Acts 17, we must infer that everywhere Paul went he observed the people and their culture. Then, he suitably illustrated and applied the message of the Gospel. So must we aptly illustrate and apply the message of the Gospel as we preach and testify today. For instance, can you imagine the Lord Jesus and the apostles, if they were here today, not making references to computers and airplanes? Regardless of the illustration however, the absolute truth of the Gospel must remain unaltered. The message of the Gospel was and is always the same.

At the lofty Areopagus in Athens, the Apostle was eventually given his opportunity by the local intelligentsia to explain his "new doctrine" to the "men of Athens." What a temptation it might have been for Paul to philosophize and attempt to impress them with his intellectual prowess. However, a simple reading of our text reveals how Paul's speech to the secularized minds of Athens was thoroughly Christian in content and loaded with the major doctrines of Christianity, from the creation to the resurrection. The text of Acts 17:16-32 also tells us that the Apostle was diplomatic, cordial, prepared and intelligent in his presentation at the Areopagus. He made allusions to their city and their culture. He was not judgmental, nor was he compromising. But, most of all, he was faithful in his message to the central beliefs of the Christian faith as we must be also. He brilliantly and smoothly shifted into a rich lesson about the God of the Scriptures. He adamantly proclaimed the need for repentance and trust in "the man whom He has ordained," who will judge someday and whose resurrection is an assurance of these realities. The lesson here for us reinforces our need to be wisely prepared and mindful that our methodology must be worthy of our Lord and pleasing to Him. Even more so, the lesson for modern Christians is that we must be faithful to the content of the message of the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is tempting and exciting to have others think highly of us intellectually, religiously, morally. While there is a need for the proper biblical teaching of cultivating our

reputation with all persons, our goal must be that our contemporaries see Jesus in us. We must not change our presentation of the Gospel to focus on us and our qualities, rather than on the Savior, who He is and what He did, even if we incur the risk of being ridiculed as babblers of “some strange things.”

We need to TRUST GOD for the results presenting the Gospel to our relativistic world of the 90's.

By his demeanor in Athens and specifically in the message at the Areopagus it might seem that the Apostle Paul was trusting in his own ingenuity to assure results. After all, he wisely observed things, geared his message to his hearers and he certainly did not antagonize them. It might seem that he met and trusted the criteria of our time to achieve success. If applying and illustrating the message skillfully makes one culturally relevant, then the Apostle was exactly that in Athens long ago.

However, by the things he said to the men of Athens at the Areopagus, it is obvious that Paul was trusting God for the results rather than his own resources. Paul may have met the Athenians where they were intellectually and spiritually, but he did not leave them there. He was not reluctant to tell them the essential information they needed to hear, nor was he simply trying to please them. He took them beyond their plateau of spiritual understanding to a level where only the Holy Spirit, and not Paul's wit and intellect, could convince and convict their darkened minds. By boldly and skillfully charging ahead with the absolute truths of the Christian faith, the Apostle showed he was only trusting God for the results. The lesson here for us is not to be enamored with our own abilities to convince and manipulate, but rather trust God for the results. We proclaim His message and it is He who is at work in the hearts of men convincing and convicting them of the truth.

Conclusion

The Apostle Paul was willing to be ridiculed as a “babbler” if it meant the salvation of lost souls. Are we as willing to present the Gospel and are we as prepared as he was? Are we as willing to incur the ridicule of our contemporaries?

Each generation faces its challenges and opportunities in the preaching of the Gospel. For instance, the Scriptures say of king David in Acts 13:36 that “David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep....” The reminder for us here is that as David had the opportunity to serve his own generation only the Apostle Paul had the opportunity to present the Gospel at the Areopagus in ancient Athens. But only we have the opportunity to present the same Gospel to the absolute truth-denying man of our post-modern world. This is the great challenge before us, our calling and our privilege. In presenting the message of absolute truths to our relativistic age we need to be wise in our methodology, we must be faithful to the content of the Gospel message and we must trust God for the results.

¹ All Scripture quotations taken from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1995).

² *Paroxyno* – “to be provoked, incensed”; Kittel & Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged edition by G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 791.