

**Home : Sermons : Aug 7, 2005****Paul at Mars' Hill****Text**

Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him. Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say?... Acts 17:16-34

Introduction

Just as Jesus told his disciples that they would witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), so we see Paul approaching Athens during his second missionary journey. As the church of Jesus Christ, we are called to be ambassadors of God, preaching the word of reconciliation to the particular culture around us. The interaction of Paul at the Areopagus in Athens reveals fundamental principles for engaging a pagan culture and winning people to Christ.

Overview

What at first serves as a waiting post while Silas and Timothy catch up soon becomes an opportunity for evangelism as Paul is *provoked* (v. 16 cf. 1 Cor. 13:5). As was his custom, he would go to the synagogue first to bring the gospel to the Jews, and then he would go to the Gentiles (v. 17 cf. Rom. 1:16). In the marketplace Paul meets Jews, devout Greeks (cf. v. 17:4), and Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who ask what this “babbling” (*spermologos*) has to say. Paul’s message is so badly misunderstood that they think he is preaching two gods, Jesus and Resurrection, but it’s interesting enough to get him into the Areopagus where he could share this *new* doctrine (v. 19). At this court he declares that what they worship ignorantly as the unknown god is actually the creator God that made heaven and earth and everything in it (vv. 22-24). This God doesn’t receive anything he needs from men’s hands since He gives everything life and breath (v. 25). Moreover, He made the nations descend from one blood and appointed where men would dwell in order that they might find and know Him (vv.25-27). Paul then quotes two different pagan poets: Epimenides from Crete (cf. Titus 1:12) and Aratus, native of Tarsus, that both refer in their original context to the supreme pagan deity Zeus. The poets had it right when they said in Him we live and move and have our being, and that we are His offspring (v. 28). Paul argues that since we come from God, we shouldn’t think He is made up of inanimate stuff (v. 29). Moreover, all must repent of this foolishness since God gave us assurance of judgment by the resurrection of Christ from the dead (vv. 30-31). Since the body was odious to the Greeks and death provided a great escape from it, it’s not surprising that Paul’s emphasis on the resurrection of the body brought on mocking (v. 32). Some would hear more, but Paul departed having convinced some (vv. 33-34).

Zeal to Preach

Once he perceived that Athens was full of idols, Paul couldn’t help but preach the gospel. After his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul was lowered down from the walls by night in order to avoid the Jews who watched the gates day and night to kill him (Acts 9:23-24). The Greeks sought to kill him in Jerusalem (Acts 9:29). He was run out of (Pisidian) Antioch by hostile Jews (Acts 13:50), stoned and left for dead after healing a cripple at Lystra (Acts 15:19), beaten and jailed at Phillipi (Acts 16:23), persecuted and sent away by night from Thessalonica (Acts 17:5, 10), and then fled from Berea to Athens because unbelievers from Thessalonica came down and set the Bereans against him (17:13-14). Despite his unruly and unmarketable message, Paul couldn’t even wait for his companions to join him before preaching the gospel to the Athenians.

In the Public Square

It is good for us that Paul wasn’t content with keeping his religion in his “heart.” The public pagan religion of Athens bothered him (v. 16) and he wasn’t willing to keep Christ away from the public square,

concealed within a Christian ghetto. Paul is no pietist, confining the faith inside his heart or home, and he is no fundamentalist, boarding up the gospel within segregated Christian ghetto. The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers mock him in common Athenian slang as someone who picked up scraps in the marketplace, bits of worthless information to peddle, but some were willing to hear more of these new ideas being offered in the agora of Socrates' city. The Areopagus was an esteemed aristocratic body that met on the Hill of Mars in ancient times. Though not a judicial body in NT times, Paul had his philosophy put on trial at the cultural heart of the city.

In the World but Not Of It

Striving to be all things to all men, Paul proclaims that the men of Athens are very religious (v. 22), but instead of leaving them there with ignorant and agnostic worship, he *declares* unto them who God is—creator, sustainer, father and planner of nations, and upholder of men (vv. 24-28). He works within the culture and its language, even the language written on and about idols, and yet declares the lordship and sovereignty of the living God and His call for repentance. Notice that Paul does not quote prophecies from the Old Testament to his pagan audience. He knows the culture, and grabs the horns of the pagan categories and uses them to bring the word of God. Where the philosophers and story tellers are helpful to teach who God is, he quotes them (v. 28). Where they are helpful to reveal who God is not, he rebuts them (vv. 24-25). Paul models for us what it is to walk the line of wisdom between syncretism and irrelevance. We know that we are called to be in the world, and not of it (1 Cor. 5:9-12), and also to think on noble and beautiful things (Phil. 4:8). We know that Jesus was a friend of sinners—think of the Samaritan woman at the well—and yet he was also “separate from sinners” (Heb. 7:26). The duty of preaching the gospel, interacting with culture, takes love, holiness and wisdom.

Our Mission

God appointed how long and where you would live before time began. You live in a particular city at a particular point in history, just like Jesus, just like Paul. What is Seattle like?

1. As *disciples*, we are called to be students of the gospel and ambassadors of Christ who know the language of the recipients of our message. Not everyone is an evangelist like Paul, but everyone in the body works according to their own gifts.
2. Our faith is a public faith. We don't fight with the world's weapons—carnal persuasion, politics and power. But we are called to give a reason for our hope and to live contagious, celebratory lives before the world.
3. We proclaim the message of the *living* God in the midst of idols. Jesus has no part in the pantheon, whether it be Greek, Roman, Muslim, Unitarian, or democratic. All idols are the work of men's hands and minds—they have eyes but can't see, mouths but can't speak, feet but can't run, courts but can't do justice, choices but can't be free, therapists but can't be healed, money but can't be content, sex but can't be satisfied, and power but can't be strong. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through him, and He sits at God's right hand where there are pleasures forever more (Ps. 16:11). Men and women are built to be in a relationship with God, and only He can satisfy our needs.
4. See our destitute and bewildered culture and reach out in love. Christians who have a vibrant relationship with God cannot help but walk in the light of forgiveness and let people see.

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