

How Do I Witness? Acts 17:22-31

Last week we asked the question, what are you willing to do for your faith. Are you willing to give up your pride, your desire to be thought well of by all, or do you have a heart to want others to know the hope and peace that you have in your relationship with Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? In our scripture today we meet a young man that we had met last week. He was the one who held the coats while the religious leaders stoned Stephen to death. When we met him he was known as Saul, his Hebrew name, and he was in agreement with the death of Stephen, as a blasphemer and one deserving of death.

We meet Saul again, but this time it is several years later. He is now known as Paul, his Greek name, and he had met Jesus and accepted him as Messiah, Savior and King. By now Paul is on his third missionary journey to establish churches in Europe and to revisit previously established churches to encourage them in the faith. His custom was to enter a city, ask to speak in the Jewish synagogue and explain to them that Jesus really is the promised Messiah. However he also took the opportunity to share the good news (Gospel) with the non-Jewish citizens as well. He lived at a time when Roman had united the known world and as a Roman citizen he had the freedom to travel to all the cities of Greece and Turkey. However all was not easy for Paul, in many cities he caused uproar, in fact, at the time of his visit to Athens he had just been run out of Thessalonica by the business community!

So in our scripture Paul had arrived in the great city of Athens, not as a sightseer, but as an evangelist, a soul-seeker. Paul came to Athens in a period of decline, although it was still recognized as a center of culture and education. The glory of its politics and commerce had faded. It had a famous university and numerous beautiful buildings, but it was not the influential city it had been. The

city was filled with idolatry, novelty (Acts 17:21), and philosophy. This sounds like Southeastern Michigan to me.

Conybeare and Howson wrote in the *Life and Epistles of St. Paul* that “Greek religion was a mere deification of human attributes and the powers of nature. It was a religion which ministered to art and amusement, and was entirely destitute of moral power” (pp. 280–281). The Greek myths spoke of gods and goddesses that acted more like humans than gods; and there were plenty of deities to choose from! One wit jested that in Athens it was easier to find a god than a man. Paul saw that the city was “wholly given to idolatry.”

Today we admire Greek sculpture and architecture as beautiful works of art, but in Paul’s day, most of this was directly associated with their religion. Paul believed that idolatry was demonic (1 Cor. 10:14–23) and that the many gods of the Greeks were unable to change men’s lives (1 Cor. 8:1–6). With all of their culture and wisdom, the Greeks did not know the true God (1 Cor. 1:18–25).

Novelty was the chief pursuit of both the citizens and the visitors (Acts 17:21). Their leisure time was spent telling or hearing “some new thing.” But the writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us that nothing is really new; it’s just that our memories are poor (Ecc. 1:8–11).

The city was also devoted to philosophy. When you think of Greece, you automatically think of Socrates and Aristotle and a host of other thinkers whose works are still read and studied today. Paul had to confront two opposing philosophies as he witnessed in Athens, those of the Epicureans and the Stoics. We today associate the word Epicurean with the pursuit of pleasure and the love of “fine living,” especially fine food. But the founder Epicurus sought truth by means of personal experience and not through reasoning, and his goal in life was pleasure, and freedom from pain and anxiety. The true Epicurean avoided extremes and

sought to enjoy life by keeping things in balance, but pleasure was still his number one goal.

The Stoics rejected the idolatry of pagan worship and taught that there was one “World God.” Their emphasis was on personal discipline and self-control. Pleasure was not good and pain was not evil. The most important thing in life was to follow one’s reason and be self-sufficient, unmoved by inner feelings or outward circumstances. They taught that humans did not need the help of God, and they were proud that they could do all things on their own.

The Epicureans said “Enjoy life!” and the Stoics said “Endure life!” These are not unlike the philosophies that people live by today. But Paul wanted to explain to both groups how they could enter into life through faith in God’s risen Son. So he used the opportunity to share the Good News of the Gospel. As was his custom, he shared his religious views in the synagogue with the Jews, but he also witnessed in the marketplace to the Greeks. Anyone who was willing to talk was welcomed by Paul to his daily “classes.”

It was not take long before the philosophers heard about this “new thing” that was going on in the marketplace, and they came and listened to Paul. As they listened, they gave two different responses. One group ridiculed Paul and his teachings and called him a “babbling,” meaning he was someone who collected various ideas from others and taught the secondhand thoughts as if they were his own. They were not impressed by the church’s greatest missionary and theologian.

Another group who listened was confused but interested. They thought Paul believed in many gods, because he was preaching “Jesus and Anastasis,” the Greek for “resurrection”. But Paul preached the Gospel. Paul did not modify his evangelistic tactics in Athens, hoping to appeal to the intellectuals, he preached the Gospel as boldly in Athens as he had done in Berea.

The Council of the Aeropagus was responsible to watch over both religion and education in the city, so it was natural for them to investigate the “new doctrine” Paul was teaching. They courteously invited Paul to present his doctrine at what appears to have been an informal meeting of the council on Mars’ Hill. Paul was not on trial; the council members only wanted him to explain what he had been telling the people in the marketplace. After all, life in Athens consisted in hearing and telling new things, and Paul had something new!

Paul’s message is a masterpiece of communication. He started where the people were by referring to their altar dedicated to an unknown god. He aroused their interest, then he explained who that God is and what He is like. He finished the message with a personal application that left each council member facing a moral decision, and some of them decided for Jesus Christ.

Paul opened his address with a compliment: “I see that in every way you are very religious” (Acts 17:22, NIV). They were so religious, in fact, that they even had an altar to “the unknown god,” for fear that they may have neglected some beneficent deity. It was this God that Paul declared. I believe that we can learn to witness from Paul’s example:

First Paul declared the greatness of God, the Creator. Most people we meet ask the same kinds of questions. “Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going?” Science tries to answer the first question, and philosophy wrestles with the second; but only the Christian faith has a satisfactory answer to all three. The Epicureans said that all was matter and matter always was. The Stoics said that everything was God, “the Spirit of the Universe.” God did not create anything; God only organized matter and impressed on it some “law and order.” Aren’t those some of the same things we hear today? Isn’t that what Mr. Hawkings says?

But Paul boldly stated, “In the beginning, God!” God made the world and everything in it, and God is Lord of all that God has made. God is not a distant

God, divorced from creation; nor is God an imprisoned God, locked in creation. God is too great to be housed in man-made temples (1 Kings 8:27; Isa. 66:1–2; Acts 7:48–50), but God is not too great to be concerned about human needs (Acts 17:25). We wonder how the Council members reacted to Paul’s statement about temples, as they stood before the Acropolis.

Paul also proclaimed the goodness of God, as provider. We humans may pride ourselves in serving God, but it is God who serves humans. If God is God, then God is self-sufficient and needs nothing that humans can supply. Not only do the temples not contain God, but the services in the temples add nothing to God! It is God who gives to us what we need: “life, and breath, and all things.” God is the source of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17). God gives us life and God sustains that life by God’s goodness (Matt. 5:45). It is the goodness of God that should lead humans to repentance (Rom. 2:4). But instead of worshiping the Creator and glorifying God, humans worship God’s creation and glorify themselves (Rom. 1:18–25).

Paul proclaimed the rule of God. The gods of the Greeks were distant beings who had no concern for the problems and needs of humans. But the God of Creation is also the God of history and geography! God created humankind from one blood (Acts 17:26, NIV) so that all nations are made of the same stuff. The Greeks felt that they were a special race, different from other nations; but Paul affirmed otherwise. It is not the power of man, but the government of God, that determines the rise and fall of nations (Dan. 4:35). Paul quoted from the poet Epimenides: “For in Him we live, and move, and have our being.” Then he added a quotation from two poets, Aratus and Cleanthes, “For we are also His offspring.” He was affirming the “Fatherhood of God,” for humans are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26). This led to Paul’s logical conclusion: God made us in His image, so it is foolish for us to make gods in our own image!

As he brought his message to a close, Paul summarized the clear evidences of God's grace. For centuries, God was patient with human sin and ignorance (see Acts 14:16; Rom. 3:25). God held back divine wrath. In due time, God sent a Savior, and now God commands all humans to repent of their foolish ways. This Savior was killed and then raised from the dead, and one day, will return to judge the world. The proof that He will judge is that He was raised from the dead.

It was the doctrine of the Resurrection that most of the members of the Council could not accept. This is the same issue for many people today. They can accept everything about the Bible and the teachings of Jesus accept the Resurrection, but without the Resurrection that is no Christianity and no Church!

There were three different responses to Paul's message. Some laughed and did not take Paul's message seriously. Others were interested but wanted to hear more. A small group accepted what Paul preached, believed on Jesus Christ, and were saved. The same is true for us today. When we witness to who Jesus is we will get those same reactions, but not getting approval is no excuse for not witnessing. Some of those same people who postponed their decision may have eventually trusted Christ. Some of us think when we witness everyone will believe, but that was not the case in Athens. We assume Paul stayed for a time in Athens and continued to minister to both believers and unbelievers. As proud, sophisticated, wise as Athens was they had difficulty accepting Paul's humbling message of the Gospel, so few accepted Christ. But he was not a failure since one soul is worth the whole world!

We still need witnesses who will invade the marketplaces and schools rooms and present Christ to people who are wise in this world but ignorant of the true

wisdom of the world to come. Our challenge is to take the Gospel to our “Athens.”

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Will you witness now that you know how?

¹Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Ac 17:16

²Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:403