

November 24, 2013

# *A Gospel Centered Community*

## *A Market Place Gospel*

**Acts 17:16 – 34**

We are moving through the book of Acts and looking at how the early church started from a small group of people in a backwater province of the Roman Empire and then literally exploded in the next two centuries to become the dominant religion in the western world. Last week we saw how the gospel came to the city of Philippi in Macedonia from Asia Minor and the church began there, as we looked at the three stories of Lydia, the slave girl and the jailor. And today we come to Athens where Paul engages the leading thinkers of the day in gospel dialogue and we'll look at what that text has to say about how to engage the culture.

When Paul gets to Athens, it almost seems like this episode is a chance encounter, except we know that nothing in God's universe happens by chance. Luke tells us that Paul is waiting there for Silas and Timothy to join him. But you notice right away that Paul doesn't waste any opportunities. He gets engaged. Athens is the intellectual and cultural hub of the Roman Empire. Even though the Romans conquered the Greeks, they have a high regard for all things Hellenic and Athens was the place to be. Culturally it would have been the Paris of the Empire and intellectually it would have been Harvard and Yale and Oxford and Cambridge all rolled into one. And its into this atmosphere that Paul is sort of dropped as it were – just waiting for his friends to show up.

Now there's a lot in here and I suppose to really do it justice we should spend a couple hours talking about the background and context and history and theology and implications – but we don't have that kind of time. What we'll do instead is look at the broad overview of this text and note three main observations or three important things we learn here. There are three big ideas in what is commonly called the Mars Hill discourse that is a great model for us as believers in sharing the gospel. And I think those three things this text shows us are engage the culture; exalt the greatness of God; and elevate the cross. ***Engage the culture – exalt the greatness of God and elevate the cross.***

First of all look at what starts this off here in verse 16: *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** The word provoked is ***paraxuno*** and it means to stimulate, to sharpen, to provoke in a good way. It also means to irritate, to exasperate, to arouse to anger. And I see both senses in use here. On the one hand Paul was provoked to exasperation by a city filled with the evidence of misplaced worship. The city was literally filled with statues and temples and holy shrines to thousands of so-called gods. And that is extremely provocative to someone who has met the living God. There may even have been a sense of anger at the deception foisted on these people by Satan. Offering gods of marble and wood as substitutes for the real things. Whatever it was, the word gives us a profound sense that Paul was conflicted as he looked at the city full of idols. On the one hand hatred for the deception – and on the other, love for the deceived. I have the same sense in my own soul as I look around at the idols erected to the gods of our culture – a deep sense of anger at the lie – and a profound sense of compassion for those who have bought into the lie.

But this ***paraxuno*** also stimulated a gospel response, because Luke records that as a consequence of seeing all these fake gods, Paul is compelled to take action – Paul ***engages the culture***: *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 Notice where he went – into the synagogues and into the marketplace. He went to church and he went downtown. Here he is in the center of intellectual and cultural life of the Empire and he takes the gospel into the marketplace. Paul sees the gospel not just as something to bring private, personal peace and joy, but he saw the gospel as something for the public square and public discourse. He knew that what he had could compete very well in that sophisticated intellectual and cultural atmosphere. He had no qualms about going toe to toe with best.

When we hear the word marketplace, we tend to think of shopping. But the marketplace, the **agora**, was the cultural center of those cities. That's where you got the news of the day – CNN and Fox News was not quite there – the **agora** was the media center in an age without TV, radio, internet and newspapers. It was the center of the financial world – that's where the power brokers met and did their business. It was the art center, the political center and that's where the latest philosophical trends were discussed and debated. All of that was in the marketplace and in Athens, the ideas that were forged and accepted there flowed from there to the rest of the Empire. And Paul is not intimidated and he plunges right into that mix with the gospel and Luke says he was reasoning with them.

The word reasoning here is **dialegomai** and you can guess that's where we get our word dialogue from. But it was a very specific type of conversation or discussion that indicated a Socratic reasoning – a kind of reasoning that was not debate like we know it, nor was it preaching. You don't see Paul on a corner soap box haranguing the crowd like a street preacher. It was a reasoning with others where you ask questions, you find out the other person's premises, you listen very carefully and then you try to show them the error of their ways on the basis of their own premises. You get engaged. You're not bombarding someone with Truth, trying to smash through their defenses like a battle tank. You listen, you talk, you discuss, you reason, you engage. And Paul plunges into the marketplace for some days and engages the culture – because Paul believes that the gospel has what it takes to challenge the most dominant ideas of a culture.

The implication of course for us is that on the one hand we don't just preach to the culture – nor on the other hand do we hide from it. You're aware of the leading philosophical ideas and ethos of a culture and you engage those ideas because the gospel has what it takes to confront and challenge those ideas and expose the lies they are built upon. Look at what happened 2,000 years ago. A little itinerant Jewish preacher from a backwater province comes to the intellectual and cultural center of the world and has the audacity to challenge the reigning ideas and philosophies of the day – and they laugh him to scorn.

In fact in verse 18, the guys that Paul is engaging say, "*What does this babbler wish to say?*" Literally, '**What does this gutter sparrow have to offer?**' it was a word used to describe someone who picked up bits and pieces of ideas and information in the marketplace and spun them into some sort of philosophy or theory. It was an insult. And yet in a little over two hundred fifty years – Paul's ideas and philosophies triumphed, Christianity swept that Greek and Roman world and completely changed the dominant cultural ideas and philosophies. And skeptics who were sneering at Christianity and saying, 'What intelligent person could ever believe that? Within a couple hundred years pretty much all intelligent people believed that.

Historians have scratched their heads trying to figure out why Christianity spread so far and so fast and replaced the pagan culture so completely. But most will agree that the dominant philosophies were not robust enough to stand the test of time. There were questions and issues and glaring inconsistencies that the prevailing philosophies and religions of the culture could not answer or stand up to, and the gospel comes along and exposes the inconsistencies and answers the tough questions. Questions like what is the meaning of life, or how do you deal with pain and suffering or what is right and wrong? You see Paul plunging right into the marketplace where these questions were being asked, but no one really had adequate answers. That's why the gospel is right at home in the marketplace.

Luke tells us that Paul was reasoning with some of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers there in the marketplace. Because we don't have the time to get into detail I'm just going to generalize here. The Stoics were the moralists of their day and the Epicureans were the relativists. The Stoics believed in moral absolutes and that the meaning of life was to be good and virtuous and noble and honorable. And out of that came the idea that perseverance, endurance, soldiering on, was one of the top virtues. When suffering or tragedy happened you had to be detached – you hardened yourself – you didn't weep, you didn't moan or complain – you were stoic. You never let life get you down, or at least you never let on that life could get to you – you never let them see you sweat. That was the meaning of life.

But history tells us that didn't really work out for most people. Stoicism wasn't a lot of help or comfort or encouragement in tragedy or suffering or pain. And the gospel moved in with hope, and eternal life and real joy, and people saw how Christians suffered so well and loved so well in spite of the suffering and pain. And people began to leave the gods of stoicism in droves.

Historically, Stoics didn't do very well. And neither did Epicureans. Epicureans believed that there were no moral absolutes – everything is relative; they didn't believe in any gods to speak of. They believed that when you died everything was all over – all you had was the here and now and so the meaning of life for them was to be happy. You should be free to do whatever made you happy and you should live your life for pleasure because this is all there was. Epicureans also talked a lot about sexual freedom and pleasing yourself by not recognizing any boundaries on sex. And historians tell us that even though Christian philosophy was apparently more restrictive on subjects like sex, Epicurean thought was eventually obliterated by Christian thought. And the reason was is that this kind of sexual freedom, rather than being liberating and freeing actually led to loneliness and emptiness and depression; whereas the more restrictive Christian view of sex led to greater unity, community, joy, and fulfillment.

You know, there is this thought in our culture that Christian views on sexual purity are so old fashioned. You'll hear people say all the time things like, 'Come on, this is 2013 – your attitude about sex or living together or gay marriage is so outdated'. I was watching an interview done in England on one of their morning shows with a couple that had refused to open their bed and breakfast to a gay couple on the grounds that they were Christians and had a Christian view of sex and marriage. And the woman who was interviewing them said, 'But this is 2013!' as if the date had something to do with the morality of the issue.

You need to understand, Christianity was born into a culture with the very same philosophies and ideas and morality we are facing today. The average view of the modern person's view of sexual freedom was the average view of the Athenian citizen back then. And that didn't last. What Christians ought to say is 'Been there, done that, didn't work'. And part of the power of Christians in that environment, part of the thing that caused Christian values and ethics to spread was that they saw through the ethic that said, 'Your happiness is the highest goal and you need to be free to have sex with whoever and however you want'. They saw through the inconsistencies in the culture and exposed the weakness in it. And we have those same weaknesses and inconsistencies today. We also have those Stoics and Epicureans today – they just aren't called that.

We need to realize that the gospel is powerful and able to speak to the prevailing culture of the day and can speak to the culture at these inconsistencies, at the weak points of culture. In those places where the culture's ethic says one thing but their experience hints that there is a different reality. If you talk to people who have made it their life's passion to be sexually free in all regards, what you find are people who are incredibly lonely, incredibly unsatisfied, incredibly jaded and who will tell you in unguarded moments, 'This really doesn't work'. Their ethic is inconsistent with the reality and at some level, they know that there is something they don't know. They know there is a God they need but they don't know.

And Paul realized this. And he gets invited to the Areopagus to talk about his views. He was reasoning with these guys in the marketplace and they invite him to speak to the council of the leading thinkers and philosophers of the day, the movers and shakers in society, the wealthy and the influential – these were the big guns. And they were so intrigued by his reasoning in the marketplace that they invited him to speak to them. And the first thing he does is point to the god they know they don't know: *"Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 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 17:22-23"*

Paul comes in and says, 'Men of Athens, I think you know that there's a God above and beyond these gods to which you've given names – because you've put up this altar to the unknown god'. Now the kind of worship these people engaged in was appeasement worship – give the god stuff so he or she will bless you or at least not target you for destruction. So somebody was probably just doing due diligence in case there might be a god they missed and didn't want to upset whoever it was so they build this generic altar to him. But Paul sees the real issue here. **The real issue with them, and with us, is that we know there's a God there that we don't know.** We have a sense that there is a higher authority in the universe but we deny it, we marginalize it, we hide behind our fanciful theories and pseudo-intellectualism and alternate theories of life. There's a deep inner knowing that even though your public ethos and philosophy of life says that there's no ultimate Being to whom we are accountable, your actions are inconsistent with your philosophy. Essentially, Paul says, 'Let me show you how inconsistent you are'.

And he begins by **exalting the greatness of God**: *The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 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,* Acts 17:24-26 The Athenians had no god like this. If you've read any Greek mythology, you know that their gods were petty, and mean and jealous and scheming – in fact their gods were just like them. They were just like humans – only with spectacular powers. They were not like this God. Their gods didn't create the world and everything in it. Their gods weren't able to create humans even. Athenians believe they sprang out of the soil (which is a lot closer to the reality of the thing than they knew). This God didn't need anything – their gods were needy. This God wasn't served by human hands – their gods required it. And this God is sovereign over everything – He made everything and He controls everything – every event in history is under His control.

And, although this God is greater than any god they've ever heard of, on the other He is more approachable than any god they know. This God made men: *that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,* Acts 17:27 This is a bigger God, a higher God, a more transcendent God than you've ever heard of – but He's also more near, more, immanent, more intimate than any god you've ever known. He wants to meet with you – He wants to fellowship with you. And what's more – you actually know this to be true. Your own culture testifies to it.

And here Paul turns their own words back on them. He quotes their own poets. *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."* Acts 17:28 These two lines are from some of their own celebrated thinkers and Paul is saying, 'Some of your own thinkers have proposed a god like this – a God who is so great that it is His power that holds us all up every moment and a God that we image and reflect – your own people have proposed that this God exists'. This view of a great God, a God who is worthy of worship, a God far bigger than the gods they have which were really only extensions of themselves, exposes at the same time, **our deep denial of the truth** and **the inherent inconsistencies in our thinking**. In other words, to some degree we all know that there is a God like this, even though we deny it. And Paul says, let me show Him to you.

In 1995, an anthropologist, Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, wrote an article titled: **Anthropologists, Cultural Relativism, and Universal Rights** outlining her position on what she saw as an incredible human rights abuse during her work in the Sudan. She was working among a people group there who still practiced female circumcision and it really bothered her. Even though as an anthropologist and enlightened individual she maintained that anthropologists should not make value judgments about cultural differences, she couldn't help but make a value judgment that this cultural practice was wrong. She was a relativist – you can't judge a culture from outside – that was her worldview. Who am I to say what another culture does is wrong for them? She says, *'For a long time I felt trapped between, on one side, my anthropologist's understanding of the custom and of the sensitivities about it among the people with whom I was working, and, on the other, the largely feminist campaign in the West to eradicate what critics see as a "barbaric" custom.'*

In other words, she was conflicted between her worldview – cultural relativism, and the notion that there is a higher authority – universal human rights. I have no right to judge -but this is wrong. How can she know this is wrong? How can a moral feeling become a moral obligation? How can feeling like a cultural practice is wrong turn into something like a universal right? It only works if you believe in a God who is ultimate over all – a God who sets boundaries and controls everything. A God who made the world and everything in it. But she didn't believe in God – and she concludes like this: I have absolutely no right to impose my western cultural morals and beliefs on any other culture – and yet I have to believe that universal human rights exist and we have to choose those over cultural practices when they are abusive. And so I am going to work to end this practice in the Sudan'.

**If your premise that there is no God, leads you to a conclusion that doesn't make sense, then you should probably change your premise.** Her premise was a secular view that culture is relative – it doesn't matter how women are treated in the culture – that's their culture. But she knew that wasn't right – deep down she couldn't agree with her own conclusion. And this is exactly what Paul is saying – 'Your conclusions tell you that your premise is faulty'. If he were speaking to this anthropologist he would say, 'Your working for universal human rights in the Sudan is an altar to an unknown God.'

You know He's there, you're acting as if He's there, you sense that there is a bigger god than cultural relativism, your conclusions make no sense if He's not there. And yet you won't admit that He's there. So let me show you this great God that you know you don't know'. This is an appeal to the intellect, but it is also an appeal to the heart. Our hearts were built to want a great God – a God that we can't manipulate, a God that we can't cajole or overrule. We fight against it, but in the end that's what we want. And Paul shows them that God. He says, 'This God has *determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place*; or as another translation puts it, *He has determined their appointed times and marked out the boundaries of their habitation*. Do you know what that means – that means God foreordained everything. When you were born, where you live, where you've gone – has all been foreordained by this God. **God is so big that everything that happens is part of His plan.**

And we hate that idea when we first hear it – it rocks us to the core and we do everything we can to deny it. We want a God we can bend to our will, a God that does what we want – and we come up with the most fantastic theories and explanations to accommodate our views of the God we want and He ends up looking a lot like us. And that's a small god – a god that is simply a projection of us. A lot of Christians have what Christian Smith called a moralistic therapeutic deism. They believe in God, but He's only there to give us what we want, and the main goal in life is to be happy and feel good about yourself. We believe in God as long as He operates like we think He ought to operate and gives us what we want. But that God is too small to trust. That God is too small to worship. Only a great God is worthy of our worship – only a big God is worthy of our trust.

And the test comes when trouble hits. What happens to your faith when tragedy strikes? What is there to trust when life turns on you? Does your faith disintegrate? If it does it shows that you've been believing in something less than God Himself, and He's upset your neat little program of how things are supposed to work. Elizabeth Elliot once said, '**God is God, and if He is God, He is worthy of my worship and my service, and I will find rest nowhere but in His will. And that rest is infinitely, immeasurably, unspeakably beyond my largest notions of what He is up to. If God were small enough to be understood, He wouldn't be big enough to be worshiped**'. In other words, this is a great God. A sovereign God. The only God worthy of your worship and your service and your obedience. We have to exalt a great God in the marketplace.

And finally, we must **elevate the cross** in the marketplace. C.H. Spurgeon once described his entire philosophy of preaching like this: "**I take my text and make a beeline to the cross,**" And Spurgeon took his cue from Paul. Paul's discourse on the Areopagus ended rather abruptly – because he took his audience to the cross of Christ. Everything seemed to be going fine until he mentions the death and resurrection of Jesus. *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. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 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 17:29-31

Paul's whole argument has been to show them that this unknown God really exists. That their altar to this God exposes the deep contradictions and inconsistencies in their own philosophies and it's this God they really long to worship. How does Paul do that? What does Paul offer as proof that this God who is above and beyond everything exist? **He says the proof is in the resurrection.** And it was this that ended the discussion. Because the death and resurrection of Jesus brings to bear certain realities, certain truths, certain obligations even, that we don't want to hear. Everything was fine up to this point. Because up until we start talking about the death and resurrection of Jesus, people can look at Christianity and say, 'Well the Golden Rule is sure a good one, I like that, and I can accept Jesus was a good moral teacher, and Christianity certainly has some really great points – but there are some things I don't like – I'll accept that, but I won't accept that' – and people can pick and choose what they like.

But the death and resurrection of Jesus changes everything. If Jesus was raised from the dead – then Christianity is true and there is a great God that is over everything and He does command people everywhere to repent and He will judge the world in righteousness. If the resurrection is true – then all your gods are simply statues and you must submit everything to this God. It means you can't pick and choose your reality – you can't live with a moral therapeutic gospel – if Christ died and was raised to life – God is real and you must embrace the gospel as true whether you like it or not.

You see, if the resurrection is true – we cannot be content with half-measures or lukewarm allegiance to Christ. If it isn't true – we can live any way we want. But if it is true, and it is, we have no option but to live for Him with all our might and discard any other ideas and philosophies and religions. Because the resurrection means that God has the highest claim on your life. If you're a believer, have you really come to grips with this?

Penn Jillette, one-half of the comedy/illusionist team of Penn and Teller, is an outspoken atheist who was evangelized by a Christian one time and said this about the experience: *'I've always said that I don't respect people who don't proselytize. If you believe that there is a heaven and a hell, and people could be going to hell, or not getting eternal life or whatever, and you think it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward...how much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? I mean, if I believed, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that a truck was coming at you, and you didn't believe that truck was bearing down on you, there is a certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that.'*

The resurrection proves the gospel, but everybody who believes the gospel embodies the gospel. Look at how upset Paul was with all the idols in Athens. What did he do? He doesn't retreat nor does he stand on his soapbox and preach – he plunges into the marketplace where he knew he would be mocked and scorned by some, he knew others would be non-committal but polite; but he also knew he would be heard and believed by some. *Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." So Paul went out from their midst. 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* Christians – how real is your faith?

if you're an unbeliever, have you come to grips with the truth of the resurrection? Jesus was raised from the dead – there's an incredible amount of historic, eyewitness evidence for this. Don't be a mocker – don't say 'Talk to me tomorrow about this'. You see, Paul was so convinced of this that he went into the marketplace in the middle of one of the most sophisticated, cultured, intellectual places of that day because there is God that people know they don't know, because the gospel is real and Jesus was raised from the dead for your salvation and mine and these people needed to hear it. He knew he would be mocked and scorned, but that was nothing compared to the mocking and scolding and beating and suffering Jesus took to bear our sins on the cross to deliver us from sin and death and hell and bring us to God. Men of Athens, let me tell you about this God you don't know. Let me tell you about a great God who is really worthy of your worship. Let me tell you how He left His throne and came to earth to rescue fallen, broken people, by dying on a cross and being raised to life again to bring you back to the God who made you.

*Our gracious God and Father,*

*The heavens declare Your glory, the earth Your riches. The universe is Your temple and Your presence fills immensity. Fill our souls with the wonder and awesomeness of Your greatness. Break in pieces every prideful, lofty thought that refuses to acknowledge Your rule and reign over all things. Destroy the idols that presume to take Your place. Annihilate each clinging shred of self-righteousness that would prompt us to create a god in our own image. Melt our hearts with Your majesty and mercy. Nothing exceeds Your power. Nothing is too great for You to do, nothing is too good for You to give. Your might is infinite, Your love is boundless, Your grace is limitless and Your name is glorious. Let us take that saving name into the marketplace of this world to engage our culture, exalt Your name and lift up the cross to a dying world for the sake of Your name and Your glory we pray in the saving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*