

Very Religious People

Acts 17:16-34

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Conventional wisdom in America says that we don't talk to strangers about religion or politics. However, I have found that if people sense you aren't trying to argue with them and are genuinely interested in hearing their thoughts, you can have productive conversations about religion.

People tend to fall into a few different camps. One camp says, I'm a Christian. Some people just mean that they have family that go to church, or they were raised in the church, but their so-called faith doesn't really impact their lives. Sometimes, however, people genuinely are believers and you can see the fruit in their lives.

A second camp is anti-religious. They say that there is no god, and they scoff at the foolish people who believe in one. They are pure materialists who believe we're just a collection of molecules and that life has no purpose or meaning. "You live, you die, and that's it," would accurately describe their belief system.

And a third type might tell you that they're not religious but are very spiritual. They don't believe in organized religion, but believe there is a spiritual component to our existence and are open to different expressions of that. Their beliefs may run the gamut, but they recognize there is something beyond themselves.

Of course, these are not the only answers you will encounter, but they are some of the most common ones I have seen. In our passage this morning, we will see how Paul chose to approach people who would probably fall into these latter two groups. While he did not see a groundswell of new believers because of his efforts, he gives us a good model which we can look to as we attempt to engage the world around us.

Athens

As we mentioned last week, Paul had been ushered away from Berea after some interlopers from Thessalonica began to cause problems for him there. He left Silas and Timothy behind to tend to the believers there, while he boarded a ship for Athens.

Unlike most of the cities in the book of Acts, we have some familiarity with Athens. We know that Athens is the capital of Greece, and you may even know a bit about its history and the ruins (such as the Parthenon and the Acropolis) that are still there today. You might have even visited these sites yourself!

Still, it's important to understand what Athens was like when Paul visited. During the Golden Age of Greece, Greece was a major world power. Its influence had spread throughout much of the known world, and many famous people hailed from Athens at that time. Plato and Aristotle's contributions to philosophy are still felt today. Hippocrates contributed to the field of medicine, and doctors today still take the

Hippocratic Oath. People like Sophocles and Euripides made great contributions to theater and poetry. And the Greeks developed the world's first direct democracy.

Unfortunately, when Paul visited Athens, that era had long since passed. Now, Athens was under the control of the Roman Empire and had a population of about 10,000 people. They had a significant measure of freedom under Rome, but they were not the world power they once were. The glory of Greece was in the past, but the people of Athens were still proud. But they did not make the contributions to the world that Plato, Aristotle, and others once had. Now, they imagined themselves to be pondering the deep questions of the world but made no real impact on it. Many places in academia today feel much the same.

It is against this backdrop that we pick up the story of Paul's visit.

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city. ¹⁷ He went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and he spoke daily in the public square to all who happened to be there.

¹⁸ He also had a debate with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. When he told them about Jesus and his resurrection, they said, "What's this babbler trying to say with these strange ideas he's picked up?" Others said, "He seems to be preaching about some foreign gods."

¹⁹ Then they took him to the high council of the city. "Come and tell us about this new teaching," they said. ²⁰ "You are saying some rather strange things, and we want to know what it's all about." ²¹ (It should be explained that all the Athenians as well as the foreigners in Athens seemed to spend all their time discussing the latest ideas.) (Acts 17:16-21, NLT)

Paul took some time to explore the city. He wandered around the marketplace and took in the sights. He was appalled at all the idols throughout the city. Roughly 50 years after Paul's visit, a historian named Pausanias would say that you were more likely to encounter a god or goddess in Athens than a human. Some estimates put the number of idol statues in Athens at this time at around 30,000! This means there were three times as many "gods" in the city as there were people! You can understand why Paul was so distressed.

Paul first went to the synagogue, where he engaged the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles by reasoning with them from the scriptures. This was his general approach everywhere he went, as he shared the most in common with these groups. But he did not stop in the synagogues. He also began speaking every day in the public square to any who would listen to him. Today, we would call this street evangelism, or open-air evangelism.

Paul engaged the people passing by and told them about Jesus. Some were willing to listen, but most ignored him as part of the background noise of the city. Some local

philosophers, however, began to debate with Paul. Luke says they were Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.

The Epicureans believed there was no god who controlled the world. They saw the world as essentially meaningless, so it made sense to maximize pleasure and minimize pain in their lives. But they didn't do this by partying and indulging their senses. Rather, the Epicureans believed the greatest pleasure was found in a simple, uncomplicated life. They were practical atheists and sought to enjoy life as much as possible, as there was no greater meaning to the world.

The Stoics were fatalists. They believed everything was outside their control, so they should just accept their fate. Life had no meaning, so they should face everything with resignation and a "stiff upper lip." That is why when we describe someone as stoic today, we mean that they don't show much emotion.

These were the men Paul engaged in the city square. As Luke noted, the Athenians loved hearing new ideas, if for no other reason than to convince themselves of how cultured and intelligent they were, so they were intrigued by Paul. When he began to speak of the resurrection, they scoffed (since neither group believed in life beyond the grave), but still wanted to hear more of him. So they invited him to speak to the high council, which was known as the Areopagus.

On Mars' Hill

The Areopagus was a group of philosophers and leaders of the city. The NLT calls them the city council, which is probably a good description. Though these officials once held a great deal of power (they put Socrates on trial 500 years earlier), their role at this time was mostly ceremonial. It doesn't seem that they were putting Paul on trial but were interested in hearing what he had to say. To his credit, Paul delivered a marvelous, brilliant message to these highly educated individuals.

²² So Paul, standing before the council, addressed them as follows: "Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, ²³ for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: 'To an Unknown God.' This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I'm telling you about. (Acts 17:22-23, NLT)

When Paul preached to the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles in the synagogue, he would reason from the scriptures, as they recognized the authority of the scriptures. They agreed on who God was and that He had a purpose that would lead to the Messiah. Paul's task was primarily to help them see that Jesus was the promised Messiah and that He fulfilled these prophecies, just not in the way they had thought He would.

This group, however, was not on the same page. They did not believe in the God of the Bible and did not recognize the authority of the scriptures. So Paul had to find common ground with them. He remarked that they were very religious. When you understand where the Areopagus was, you can see how true this statement was.

Areopagus meant the hill of Ares, who was the Greek equivalent of the Roman God Mars. As such, in English, it is often called Mars' Hill. Just above Mars' Hill was the Acropolis, which still stands to this day. On top of this mountain was a series of temples and shrines, the ruins of which are still visible today. At the time of Paul's address, the whole top of this hill would have been covered in these majestic places of worship, along with a huge statue of Athena. It would have been an imposing sight.

The hill sat above the city, overlooking the Agora (marketplace), where people would have sold all manner of idols for people to worship, along with various other items that could be used to worship at one of the temples above the city. The people were very religious but did not recognize the authority of any one god. They sought to cover their bases and worshiped every god they could come up with. Paul observed they even had shrines dedicated to an unknown god—they wanted to be sure no one was left out.

Paul's connection to these people was to say that while they worshiped everything and anything, even an "unknown god", he wanted to reveal to them the nature of the one, true God. While they were very religious, they were groping in the darkness. Paul wanted to turn on the lights. His message really had three main points.

The first was **who God is**.

²⁴ "He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn't live in man-made temples, ²⁵ and human hands can't serve his needs—for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. ²⁶ From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries. (Acts 17:24-26, NLT)

Paul's point was that there is one God who created and sustains all things. Rather than the Athenian belief that there were many gods who had control over certain aspects of life (if that), Paul asserted that there was One God, and He is in control of all things. As such, He doesn't reside in temples and doesn't need anything from us. He is complete on His own. This was a far cry from the beliefs the Athenians held. It's a far cry from the beliefs most people in America today hold as well.

Second, Paul explained **our purpose in life**.

²⁷ "His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ For in him we live and move and exist. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' ²⁹ And since this is true, we shouldn't think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone. (Acts 17:27-28, NLT)

Paul's point was that life has a purpose. It is not meaningless or fatalistic. God is in control, yet He desires us to worship Him. In this section, Paul quoted from two famous writers his audience would have known and respected: Epimenides and Aratus. He was not endorsing these writers, but showing that even these pagan writers recognized God

as the source of our existence and that we descend from Him. His point was that God is real and active; He is not a mere piece of gold, silver, or stone.

This led to Paul's conclusion: **we must repent and turn to God.**

³⁰ "God overlooked people's ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him.

³¹ For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead."
(Acts 17:30-31, NLT)

Paul declared that everyone must repent of their sins and turn to God. It's worth noting what sins Paul spoke of. He did not talk about the decadence of the city, the rampant immorality, the greed, or anything else. He was telling the people they needed to repent of their false views of God! We often try to fix all the ills of our world today, but that cannot happen until people are willing to recognize and submit to God as He really is! When that happens, they will begin to change their behavior. Until it happens, any change of behavior will not last.

Paul called the Athenians to recognize the existence of God, to submit to Him and worship Him for who He is and has revealed Himself to be, and then to submit to Jesus Christ, His Son, who proved His divinity by rising from the grave. Paul told the people what was at stake: we will each be judged for our actions. We will stand before God and give an account for why we acted as we did. We will not be able to claim ignorance, as there is plenty of evidence of who God is if we will simply open our eyes. Paul pleaded with the Athenians to see this and submit to the God revealed in creation, the person of Jesus, and in the Holy Scriptures.

Unfortunately, most were too hardened and arrogant to allow Paul's words to sink in.

³² When they heard Paul speak about the resurrection of the dead, some laughed in contempt, but others said, "We want to hear more about this later." ³³ That ended Paul's discussion with them, ³⁴ but some joined him and became believers. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the council, a woman named Damaris, and others with them. (Acts 17:32-34, NLT)

Most of the people gathered there simply laughed Paul off. They were unwilling to even consider the things he said because they had already concluded there was no life beyond the grave, so any talk of the resurrection of the dead was obviously foolish. But some did believe. We are told of two, but that there were others as well.

Some have argued this means Paul's approach was flawed, and that he failed. Some argue that when Paul's statement to the Corinthians that he resolved to preach nothing but Christ's crucifixion (1 Corinthians 2:2) indicates that he realized he had taken the wrong approach in Athens. While I think that's possible, and there may even be some wisdom in that approach, I do not think Paul failed in his efforts. I simply believe the ground in Athens was hard. No matter his approach, many would be unwilling to genuinely consider what he said. Still, God used Paul to reach some in Athens. And we

do not know how long Paul's words continued to resonate in the heads and hearts of those who heard him that day. The Lord sometimes causes the seeds we plant to take root much later than we might have expected.

Conclusion

As we look at Paul's approach with the people in Athens, I think we can draw a few lessons from it. **First, sound theology solves a lot of problems.** Paul didn't speak to the people about morality or the other felt needs of the day. His focus was singular—the character of the one true God. He knew that if people recognized the Lord for who He is, they would submit to Him, which would lead them to change their behavior in all the other areas of life. My challenge to you is who is the God you worship? Is He the God who created you, who guides and directs all of life, who designed you, and tells you how to live? Do you worship a God who will one day call us to account for what we have done? This is the God revealed in scripture. He is the God who is. Any view of God that falls short of this standard will not lead us to the right place. But if we recognize God for who He is, many of the other dominos will fall as well.

Second, we must call people to repentance. Most people do not believe there will be a day when we will be judged for their actions. If they do, they imagine they will be judged favorably, because God will see all the good things they have done and be impressed. But Paul says God will judge us on how we related to Him. Have we worshiped Him for who He is or have we created and worshiped a god of our own imagination? We must call people to submit to the God who is, because one day they will stand before Him face to face.

Finally, we must meet people where they are. Paul's approach was different depending on his audience. These people didn't care about the Bible, so Paul backed up to where he could find common ground. What did they agree on? They agreed that there must be a god—Paul wanted to show them who the True God is. While the message of Christianity never changes, the way we present it to people will always be unique, because what effectively communicates to one person will not be effective for another. We must find common ground with people and work to help them move from that point to the fullness of the gospel message. It may not happen all at once, but we should be working to help move them closer and closer to the truth.

The people Paul encountered in Athens are very similar to the people we each encounter today. Many have flawed views of God, which leads to flawed views of themselves and flawed views about what life is all about. Our task is twofold: first, we must recognize and worship the God who is. We must submit to God as He has revealed Himself to us and live in accordance with that reality. Second, we must help others to do the same. We must look for opportunities to point people to the truth of who God is. Many of the problems we are facing today stem from this simple reality: we do not know who God is, so we do not know who we are or what our purpose is. Whether the people around us recognize it or not, they desperately need to know the “unknown god” they are seeking. And it's our responsibility and privilege to introduce them to Him.

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