

IX. Contending and Defending the Faith in Biblical Perspective  
*Contending and Contenders—Defending and Defenders*  
“Defending the Faith: A Case Study”

Acts 17:16-34

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In this study we'll be in Acts 17. We will continue in this passage in the next study and add Revelation 19 and 22. There is one thing that if the church does not recapture we will not be able to contend or defend for the faith and that is God-designed, God-defined, God-focused, God-centered worship. Why do the angels say “Worship God” and what does that mean? That has to be recaptured in the church and that will be looked at further in our next study of Contending and Defending God-Centered Worship. In this study we are in a case study of defending the faith and we are taking it from the life of the Apostle Paul in Acts 17:16-34. I'll begin with the first six verses.

Acts 17:16-21 says [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. [17] 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. [18] Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babblers wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. [19] And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? [20] For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” [21] Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.*

The grass withers, the flower fades, God's Word abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

I want to take a moment to tell you why we are in Acts 17. I think most of you have the rhythm in this series of contending and defending the faith and why we're in it. We are in it because we are warned that Satan will attempt to intimidate the church and will infiltrate the teaching, leadership and fellowship of the church. We handle his infiltration by contending for the faith. We contend with courage and conviction but without personal contentiousness. How do we handle it when Satan intimidates whether it's through cultural shapers of the day, intellectual, physically using the power of the state or emotional? Just as Jude 1:3-4 gives us the response on how to contend for the faith in the days of infiltration, I Peter 3:13-17 tells us how to defend the faith. We defend the faith with determination and diligence without personal defensiveness. We are to be effective and step into the public square to defend the faith having first stepped into our private closet with study and prayer with the Lord, having stepped into our small group of discipleship, and having stepped into the large group of worship for the preaching of the Word. Now we're ready to step into the public arena.

Under our study of contending for the faith we looked at a case study on how Paul contended for the faith when the churches in Galatia had distorted the Gospel and when Peter, by his behavior, had betrayed the Gospel. Now I'd like to do the same thing with defending the faith. In the last study we looked at how to defend the faith from I Peter

3:13-17 and we are to always be ready to give a reason for the hope that is within you when you are asked. Remember those key words – the hope that is within you – for it creates the questions of your faith which then gives you the platform to give the reason for the hope that is within you.

I think you'll see why pretty quickly why I chose this text. I had multiple choices of how to contend for the faith in the Bible. There are even multiple choices on Paul on how to contend for the faith. I almost chose the passage where Paul defended the faith with King Agrippa or with Festus or with Felix. Those are wonderful studies in and of themselves but I went to this one because this will help us as we look at it closer in the next few studies. We'll use this as we take a closer look at the issues we'll have to deal with and the first one we'll look closer at is the issue of creation. What does the Bible say about creation? Did God create us and if so why is that important? Then we deal with a historical Adam and Eve. Is that important and should that be defended and if so why and how? In this study we'll look at how Paul defended the faith in this city.

I want to first do a short survey of the text and then I'll draw out some things for you. I love Acts 17 because my favorite verse is Acts 17:6 which says *[6] And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also."* I those thirteen words at the end of this verse and I'd like to hear them one more time. They are referring to the Gospel for in less than 25 years after the ascension of Jesus is now in Europe and there is unbelievably turmoil. Everywhere they went there would be a revival and then a riot, revival and riot, etc. in city after city after city. These people have turned the world upside down – riot, revival, riot, revival, riot, revival.

They must have had a big team of people to do this, right? As far as I can see the team were only four people turning the world upside down – Paul, Silas, then they picked up Timothy and at Troas Luke was added. They may have had more but I could only see four but the whole world is getting turned upside down. After the last riot they thought they needed to get Paul out of there for a while and put him on ship headed to Greece and landed at Athens. He is waiting for his three compatriots to join him there. Athens was one of the top two cities in the world. If you wanted to learn about state politics, ruling, and the military you go to Rome and Athens is the intellectual capital of the world for the last 500 years. Here is where Epicureanism, Stoicism, Pantheism, Atheism, Agnosticism and every possible –ism you can think of and all the religions of the day have some form or fashion there. This is the home of Aristotle, Socrates and Plato.

Paul has landed in Athens and has decided to do some sightseeing. Where he is walking I have gazed on more than one occasion. I have stood up at the Areopagus, Mars Hill and the Pantheon is up there, all on this big rock. When you look down from Mars Hill you can see the road where Paul walked and it would have been lined with idol after idol after idol. As he sees all of this he gets provoked and we get the word paroxysm from this. Paul has a paroxysm fit. When he gets provoked he starts preaching the Gospel. He starts contending for the faith and evangelizing. Paul teaches us that when we evangelize we do it to the Jew first and then to the Gentile. In Greece he'll find the Jewish people in the synagogue and he went and reasoned with them about the Gospel. Then it says he went to the marketplace which is where you'll find the Gentile. In the text it said he began to talk with anyone he happened to meet or anyone who happened to be there.

All of you who went to football games yesterday did you happen to talk to anyone you happen to meet? Paul did. His paroxysm, his provocation had moved him with courage and compassion to start telling these people about Jesus. So he went to the synagogue and then to the marketplace and as he talked with people he happened to meet he would call those Divine appointments and not just happenstance. He runs into the Epicureans and the Stoics. I grew up with the epicureans in the sixties who said if it feels good do it. The stoics are the people if it feels good you don't want to feel it so just puncture yourself or do something, get some pain in life. Then these people said to Paul, "What are you babbling about?" One preacher pointed out that the etymology of the word babbler comes from the concept of a seed picker. They are accusing Paul of being a seed picker like those pigeons who pick seeds up off the ground with his neck going back and forth.

Jesus said that as you bear witness for Him they will take you before their synagogues and courts but don't worry because He will give you what to say and how to say it through the Holy Spirit from the moment they bring you there. We are about to see Paul know what to say and how to say it when they bring him there. I choose this case study because Paul has been telling anyone and everyone about the hope that is within him. He has been preaching the Hope that is within him and they want to ask him questions about the Hope that is within him. Now he is going to reason with them about the Hope that is within him as they take him up to the Areopagus. How will he start with these people? You can't say 'turn in your Bibles to...' because they don't have one. They don't know what one is. Let's see how Paul starts with them and how he gives an account for the hope that is within him.

Acts 17:22-23 says [22] *So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. [23] 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.* So Paul found his point to make contact with them. After walking past all of these gods, seeing a whole that was marked 'the unknown god' Paul says that's the God I want to tell you about. He is not unknown for you do know Him. He has made Himself known all around you, inside of you and to you. He has made Himself known in His creation and that's the One I want to tell you about. Paul picks up on their concern where they had a hole in their 'god structure' and he uses that to take the opportunity to tell them about the true God, whom they can know that they do know and he wants to tell them more that they can know about Him.

Acts 17:24-25 says [24] *The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, [25] nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.* Do you think Paul felt the doctrine of creation was important? That is what he starts with. This God is the Creator of everything and you have to willfully become foolish to deny that what you see was made by Him. This isn't a God that is unknown but a God that you're refusing to know. You are suppressing what is obvious to you. So not only did this God create you but He sustains you. All these people are telling you what you have to do to sustain your gods but I want you to know the God that sustains you and you don't sustain Him.

Acts 17:26-28 says [26] *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, [27] that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, [28] 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.*’ You know that He made you and you’re suppressing that knowledge for it has been obvious to you all along because of that suppression you’re not worshipping Him. He made you, sustains you, upholds you, He has no need of you, you have need of Him and Paul also thought the historic Adam was important for from one man He made all of humanity. That’s why I know all of you come with the same stamp for you are made in the image of God. In that man you fell into sin and because of your sin you refuse to recognize that God to elevate yourself as god.

So Paul establishes the doctrine of God as Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer. He says this God cannot be housed in temples. This God not only made everything around you and that surrounds you but this God is above His creation as well as in the midst of His creation. Your own poets have recognized that you’re His own offspring and made by God in His image and in Him you live, move and have your being.

How can poets, philosophers and pagan philosophies get this right? That’s what we call common grace. You can have a philosophy that is all wrong but you can have some right things in it. It’s like a clock but if the clock is broken you don’t want to depend on it, right? But it still will be right twice a day. So what these poets and philosophers believe is broken and you don’t want to depend on it but they can get some things right so Paul takes advantages of that and knows what he can draw out from them.

Acts 17:29-31 says [29] *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. [30] The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, (Now he calls them to Jesus who went to the cross and paid for their sins and then calls them to believe and repent) [31] 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.”*

Not only was there a first Adam but there is a second Adam and this man is Jesus Christ. It is God having come in the flesh who paid for our sins on the cross and God has affirmed to you that He is the Savior of sinners by raising Him from the dead. So Paul calls them to believe and repent. Now what did they do when they heard this unique message of salvation by grace, not by works? This salvation is different than all the other –isms or religions that have been birthed over 500 years in Athens.

Acts 17:32-34 says [32] *Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” [33] So Paul went out from their midst. [34] But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them. As Paul defends the faith he also goes on offense to win the people who are asking him and he gets three responses. Some mock him and continue willfully in rebellion. Some believe and come to the Savior he has exalted who makes us right with God. Some wanted to hear him again so they are curious and want to know more but at a later time.*

When you go after a job you tend to find out about the company and the person who will be interviewing you so when you go out and defend the faith there are seven

things you can know from this text about the people you are talking to. The first thing is that everybody you meet is a believer. There are terms I do not use like 'churched and unchurched' so when someone asks me who I want to reach I say I want to reach sinners, some of them are in church and some of them aren't. When you say churched or unchurched that tacitly says that if they are churched then they are alright. That's not good for there are a lot of people in church that are lost and there are some people who haven't gotten into the church yet that are saved. My aim/objective is to bring people to Christ and Christ to them.

Another phrase I don't like to use is to ask people if they are a believer because I know they are. Everyone is a believer. The devil believes, James tells us. The question isn't whether you're a believer but in who or what do you believe. An atheist believes. In college I was ungodly, immoral and blasphemous but I never was an atheist. I didn't have enough faith to be an atheist. I really wanted to be an atheist but that was too big of a jump for me into irrationality. An atheist is a believer even though they believe we're conjugated mutations. To believe that is a pretty gigantic leap in faith. So everyone you meet believes in something.

Number two everybody you meet is religious. Whatever they believe is affecting the way they live their life. They have things in their life that are sacred and you can't touch it. It may be their season tickets to a football game but there are certain things in their life you cannot touch. It is what they arrange their life around because it is sacred to them.

Number three everybody is a worshipper. Whatever you believe and have arranged your life around religiously that is what you'll worship. If you watch people long enough, see their calendar, their checkbook and all of that you'll find out what they worship. Everyone worships but the question is who, what and how. If we don't get God-centered worship right we can't get anything else right. I believe it is absolutely crucial and we'll look more at that in our next study.

Look at our society. Take California and the University system. There are no Christian organizations allowed. Christian organizations don't do the systems work, whether they are allowed to be on there or not. The state actually believes we can sanitize religion out of the culture. You can't do it. You may sanitize one aspect like not letting Christianity in but you won't stop them from being religious. Watch them sign up for ISIS. Everybody you meet believes, is religious, and worships. Watch the atheist evangelize people. It ought to be rational to let us exist and now it's irrational for you to exist that they would evangelize you to the atheism of their life and anything else as one atheist said 'anybody who teaches their children the Bible ought to be convicted of child abuse.' This is someone who is a believer, religious, a worshipper, and committed to evangelism in what they believe.

Fourthly, everyone is a sinner. That means what they believe is wrong, their religion is wrong and they are worshipping wrong, unless God intervenes. We're helpless and hopeless. We will suppress the truth in unrighteousness unless God intervenes with His supernatural, redeeming power. Now this brings me to number five.

Number five, it's not working for anyone. Why do you think they are up there on the hill trying to find something new? Don't come to me with a new religion because I don't have time for it. I want to grow in my relationship with Christ but I'm not looking for anything else. The glory of God and the joy of the Lord is enough for me. The

reason they are still looking for something new is because what they have isn't working. Why is it that when you have scores of idols that you have to stick one in there to an unknown god? They have to cover their bases because something is not working. It's not working when they lay down at night and they listen to their heartbeat and eternity is in their heart. It's not working facing eternity or life or a broken world. It's not working because it's not right.

Number six is you have the solution for everyone. The solution for every son or daughter of Adam is the solution that was provided by the second Adam, Jesus Christ who went to the cross and spilled His blood so that we might be right with God. The solution to what is not working for them and the emptiness that is there has been entrusted to you and me. We have been given the stewardship of the Gospel to get to them.

Number seven is that everyone needs two things to happen to them. One, they need a Holy Spirit inspired witness of the Gospel from somebody to come to them. To be saved you have to believe and faith comes by hearing. Everybody out there needs you and me to go in the power of the Holy Spirit to speak the truth in love about Jesus Christ. Secondly, they need the Holy Spirit to set them free to believe. They need the Holy Spirit to give them eyes to see, ears to hear and a heart to respond to the Gospel. Those are the two things that are necessary.

With that being the case, what is the takeaway from this case study? A commitment to evangelize often creates an occasion to "defend the faith" which creates more opportunity to evangelize. When Paul was provoked he just started evangelizing. His cure to being provoked was to evangelize. When you do that you are giving people the hope that is within you. That then causes them to question you and that creates the opportunity for you to defend the faith which creates more opportunities for you to share the Gospel. They called Paul a seed-picker but he wasn't a seed-picker he was a seed-sower. He is out there sowing the seed of the Gospel and the Lord gives him what to say and how to say it. They begin to question him about the resurrection and the first Adam and he defends the faith. Notice how Paul goes from defense to offense as he calls them to believe and repent in Jesus Christ.

So Paul's hope that he began to preach generated the questions where he gave a reason. Paul steps into the intellectual capital of the world and he says 'let me reason with you because everything you believe is non-reasonable. It's illogical and foolishness.' It always shows up as inconsistent. I'm young enough to know that our debate in college was that was Jesus true but it was whether anything was true. So we would have professors pontificate, 'There is no absolute truth!' So what do you then say? You say 'Is that an absolute?' The rejection of a saving faith relationship with God defined by His Word is always inconsistent. In other words, you'll always be able to find a point of contact where their unknown god is if you just listen long enough and if you care deeply enough.

As Paul listens, reasons, gives his hope then that means you have to know your audience. He knew right where to start with these people. When Paul is in the synagogue he doesn't start with the doctrine of God for he starts with Jesus. The Jews knew God was their Creator, that man was a sinner and they knew the problem but they needed to know the solution so Paul started with Jesus. When Paul went to the marketplace or Mars Hill he started with God, then man, then sin, the God's remedy to

man's sin and it's absolutely unique from every -ism and religion that is here. It makes sense about life. Now believe, repent and receive the gift of eternal life. Some believed, some said 'no' and some said 'let's talk again.' Paul knew his audience.

He also spoke as a minoritarian. I need to explain this more. Perhaps if you sit down and talk with African Americans you might see how they have had to live in minoritarian positions because that is where you are as a Christian today. That doesn't mean you're not courageous or bold but when you go around and tell people you're the majority people look at you like you're an idiot because they know you're not. That doesn't mean the truth isn't the truth but we speak from minority status even in this culture. So how do you do that?

Watch Paul with humility and courage all wrapped into one. Watch him reason. Watch him develop it and unfold it. He knows his audience and when you know your audience you know that your audience does not determine your message whether you're speaking with Muslims, Hindus, atheists or whomever. The audience only determines your starting point, your vocabulary and your illustrations. God determines your message. It's in His Word. Know your audience. Know the truth.

Paul is able to walk them through a grand scope. I think we only see a distillation of Paul's message here in Athens because it only took three minutes to read it and I'm sure it was a lot longer than that. Here is a sermon that goes from God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, to man, to made in the image of God, fallen into sin, to God's solution in His Son Jesus, His atoning death, His resurrection and the invitation to believe and repent and then the call into Christ. So you need to know the truth. Whoever you are talking to is either suppressing the truth, hiding the truth or ignorant of the truth. Then bring the truth to them in love.

Thirdly, know your objective. Your objective is two-fold. Every time you defend the faith, objective number one is to dismantle every soul damning heresies. You want to dismantle thoughtfully, compassionately and convincingly soul damning heresies. The second objective is to win the souls of men and women. When Paul got up there he dismantled the -isms of that day so much so that some of them that lived there were converted like the Areopagite and others wanted him to come back and talk more about it. Yet he is also winning them for some became followers of Jesus Christ. Some wanted to know more about becoming a follower of Jesus Christ.

Now you can't convert someone but you can reason, persuade, plead and speak to them. I think that's where we are today. I know that no one can or will come to Christ until someone comes to them with the Gospel. I also know that even when someone comes with the Gospel, unless the Holy Spirit gives them eyes to see, ears to hear and a heart to believe they will not come to the Gospel. Here is something else I do know. The religions of this world, the -isms of this world, and all of those things are so empty with so much despair that the people out there are ready to listen to you and me. It seems to me they are ready to listen to you and me more than we seem to be ready to talk to them. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. Thank You Father, for the Lord Jesus the Savior of sinners who has so loved us that He has sent men and women to contend and defend for the faith that we might hear of Jesus, the Giver and

Object of our faith. If you're reading this today one of these three responses are very likely yours. If you have decided to follow Christ we'd love to hear from you and you can call us at (205) 776-5200 so we can pray with you and help you with the glory of this new life in Christ to follow the One who paid for all your sins on the cross that you might have eternal life. Maybe today you're rejecting Him, then please know we'll keep praying that God would give you eyes to see and ears to hear because whatever it is that you think is more important than Jesus will not work and there is an eternity to pay. Perhaps some of you are starting to think about this and you want to talk with someone. We are ready to talk with you. Jesus there is a whole world out there that needs to hear and is willing to talk and listen. May we be willing to speak for I pray in Jesus' Name, Amen.