



Some Laughed, Some Believed

Acts 17:16-34

Lake Arrowhead Church, Waleska, Georgia

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SOME LAUGHED, SOME BELIEVED

Acts 17:16-34

[VIDEO¹] “Some laughed ... and some believed.” That’s true today and it was true in Athens in the first century. When it comes to the Gospel, to believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for salvation, some laugh and some believe.

The book of Acts records the birth of the Church and the thirty-year period following the resurrection of Jesus. The book is filled with dramatic events and incredible stories of faith. Those who were there heard His teaching and witnessed His miracles. They saw Him die and they saw Him alive again. And they believed Jesus was the Son of God and the only way to God. They believed Him when He said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6, NAS).

First century Athens was the center of intellect, sophistication, and culture. Athens was a university city built by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Many of the world’s great thoughts were born in Athens. The people of Athens were also a spiritually curious people, and they were curious to hear Paul explain this new religion. Acts 17 says, “When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some laughed ... and some believed” (Acts 17:32, 34). It happened then and it happens today. Some laugh and some believe.

Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through Me.” Christianity is narrow and specific. Jesus is the Son of God and the only way to God. But the offer is for everyone. The offer of grace and forgiveness and peace and heaven is for everyone. All one must do is believe.

Most of us believe, so what’s the purpose of this message? To go back to the Scripture, back to the early church, and hear the Gospel as it was first proclaimed. The purpose of this message is ***to confirm what we believe and to declare what we believe.***

CURIOUS & CONFUSED

People today are the same as people in first century Athens. People are searching for happiness and meaning and answers to life’s big questions. And spiritual curiosity is a part of that search. That’s true today and it was true then.

Acts 17 describes Paul’s visit to Athens, to Mars Hill, where Greek philosophers gathered to debate. “Paul was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city” (Acts 17:16, NLT). Paul was both saddened and sickened by the pervasive idol worship in Athens. And it revealed something about the culture. People were spiritually curious and spiritually confused.

“Paul 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. 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 babbling trying to say with these strange ideas he’s picked up?’ Others said, ‘He

seems to be preaching about some foreign gods.’ Then they took him to the high council of the city called the Areopagus. ‘Come and tell us about this new teaching,’ they said. ‘You are saying some rather strange things, and we want to know what it’s all about.’ The Athenians used to spend all their time discussing the latest ideas” (Acts 17:16-21, NLT).

Standing before these statesmen and philosophers, Paul said, “Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way” (Acts 17:22, NLT). Paul complimented them for being a spiritually curious people. That’s a good thing. But when you believe in everything you really believe in nothing, and the result is spiritual confusion.²

Athens was a city full of idols. It’s estimated there were 30,000 statues across the city to honor of all the gods Athens worshiped. One Greek historian said there were more gods than people in Athens.³ Paul said, “As I was walking along, I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it – TO AN UNKNOWN GOD” (Acts 17:23, NLT). They worshiped gods they did not know anything about.

Years earlier a plague struck Athens, and the people begged their gods for relief, but the plague did not end. They couldn’t figure out which of their gods was angry and didn’t know which god to pray to. So a man named Epimenides was hired to help.⁴ Epimenides turned a flock of sheep loose throughout the city. Most of the sheep ran away, but some of the sheep simply sat down. The theory was that any sheep that sat down was bowing to some unknown god. So right there on the spot, a statue was erected to an unknown god. There were random statues like that all over Athens. For all the intellect, sophistication, and culture of Athens, some of their gods were determined by sheep sitting down.

The Bible rebukes the foolishness of idols. “Who but a fool would make his own god?” Isaiah said (Isaiah 44:10, NLT). “They carry it around on their shoulders, and when they set it down, it stays there. It can’t even move! And when someone prays to it, there is no answer” (Isaiah 46:7, NLT).

Before we laugh at their foolishness, realize we have idols today. We have our own idols that replace God. Wealth, ambition, career. Peace, prosperity, comfort. Success, pleasure, ego. Independence and self-reliance. Yes, we tend to replace God with our own idols today.

In comparison to the idols of man, Isaiah pointed to the glory of God. “Who else has held the oceans in his hand? Who has measured the heavens with his fingers? Who else knows the weight of the earth? ... Who knows enough to give him advice? ... The nations of the world are but a drop in the bucket. They are nothing more than dust on the scales. He picks up the whole earth as though it were a grain of sand ... Look up into the heavens. Who created all the stars? He brings them out like an army, one after another, calling each by its name. Because of his great power and incomparable strength, not a single one is missing” (Isaiah 40:12, 13, 15, 26, NLT).

Athens was a superstitious and spiritually confused city. We see the same thing in America today. A plurality and mingling of beliefs leading to spiritual confusion. An example of this is the COEXIST bumper sticker. The symbols stand for Islam, peace, humanism, Judaism, Wiccan, Confucianism, and Christianity. The point? Why can’t we tolerate each other’s beliefs and just get

along? I agree people should have the freedom to believe whatever they want, but all beliefs are not equal. Truth is not the sum of every opinion.

Oprah Winfrey is one of the most successful and influential people in America, and I quote her because she is representative of the dominant cultural opinion in America today. Commenting on Christianity, Oprah said, “It’s not about Jesus dying on the cross. It’s about Jesus showing us how to love.” Culture accepts Jesus as a role model of love and kindness but rejects Jesus as the necessary substitute for sin. Again representing the dominant cultural opinion, Oprah said, “There’s no way there’s one way.”

Culture believes all roads lead to God, to spiritual satisfaction, to harmony and peace. That sounds nice, but when you believe in everything you really believe in nothing.

To the philosophers in Athens, Paul declared there is a better way. “This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I am telling you about. He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he does not live in man-made temples ... He gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. 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. His purpose was for the nations to seek after God ... and *find him* ... though he is not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and exist” (Acts 17:23-28, NLT).

Paul was saying the real God is not made of gold or silver or stone or formed from the art or thought or hand of man.⁵ The real God is not a God we create, but the God who created us.

Paul complimented the people of Athens for their spiritual curiosity, but he also warned them that when you believe in everything you really believe in nothing. But here’s the good news. God does not want us to live in a state of spiritual confusion. He wants us to “find Him” and to know Him (Acts 17:27).

THE HITCHENS BROTHERS

When Paul explained Christianity in Athens, Acts 17 says, “When they heard of the resurrection, some laughed ... but some believed” (Acts 17:32, 34).⁶ It happened then and it happens today. Some laugh and some believe.

Two famous brothers experienced this clash of beliefs. For over 30 years, Christopher and Peter Hitchens have been on opposite sides of the faith issue.

Before he died of cancer in 2011, Christopher Hitchens was one of the world’s most outspoken atheists. His most famous book is titled *God Is Not Great*, with the sub-title “How Religion Poisons Everything.” He called “the human invention of god” the greatest problem in the world. He said nothing proves the “sick mind” of religious people more than the notion of hell. He called Jesus “Santa Claus for adults.” He mocked John 3:16 with his own version. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him will believe in anything – Hitchens 3:16.”

Peter Hitchens, on the other hand, is a believer in Jesus Christ. His most famous book is titled *The Rage Against God*, with a sub-title to counter his brother's book, "How Atheism Led Me to Faith." It was his brother Christopher's rage against God that caused Peter to investigate Christianity for himself. And when he did, he believed.

Peter's journey to faith was slow. As a well-known journalist in England, he kept his journey secret. He always pretended to despise Christmas. But one Christmas he found himself in a church with some friends, enjoying it but not letting it show. During this time, Peter became disillusioned with politics and with his own ambition. He knew he needed something else on which to build his life. He felt the urgency even more as he pondered the inevitability of his own death. He replayed, in his words, the "large catalog" of his sins over and over in his mind. He had no doubt, if there was a God, he would be damned. Those thoughts overwhelmed him. He knew he needed help. And finally, he turned to Jesus and put his faith in Him.

The Hitchens brothers were never close. Childhood conflict carried into adulthood and intensified with the clash of their beliefs. The brothers even debated each other on radio and television and on university campuses. For years they resented each other, and religion made it worse. This is a picture of the Hitchens brothers after one debate. You can see the sad estrangement between them. One believed and one did not.

WHAT WE BELIEVE

Most of us believe, so what's the purpose of this message? To go back to the Scripture, back to the early church, and hear the Gospel as it was first proclaimed. The purpose of this message is ***to confirm what we believe and to declare what we believe.***

That day in Athens, surrounded by statesmen and philosophers, Paul challenged them to reconsider what they believed. "God commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. 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).

To know God you must admit your sinfulness and realize your need for God's grace and forgiveness. "God commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him."⁷ Many believe that people are basically good at heart, and that sin-talk is pessimistic and psychologically harmful. We may not want to admit it but look around. Look at families, look at relationships, look at the headlines. There is something wrong in this world, and what's wrong is a thing called sin. The Bible says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23, NAS).

We're all guilty. Sin is declaring our independence from God, rejecting His authority, breaking His laws, offending His holiness. Sin is failing to live up to His standards. It's spurning the one who loves us the most. And worst of all, sin separates us from God. And it breaks His heart because He loves us so much.

To come to God there must be an admission of sin. Brokenness over our sin. Grief for offending God. To know God you must admit your sinfulness and realize your need for grace and forgiveness, grace and forgiveness which He is ready to give.

To know God you must believe that Jesus rose from the dead proving to be the Son of God. At Athens, Paul said that God “proved to everyone” that Jesus is the Son of God “by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31). If the resurrection is true, if Jesus actually rose from the dead, then He is the Son of God. Then He deserves belief and allegiance. If the resurrection is true, then Christianity is humanity’s only hope because Jesus is the only way to God. And what do you have to do? “Confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, and you shall be saved” (Romans 10:9).⁸ To know God you must believe that Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sin and you must believe that He rose from the dead proving to be the Son of God.

To know God you must commit your life to Jesus, to follow and obey Him as the Lord and leader of your life. Jesus said, “Follow Me.” Becoming a Christian means believing in Him, but it also means following Him and obeying Him and worshiping Him and adoring Him. It means living for the one who gave His life for you. It means loving the one who loves you more than anyone else in your life.

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“When they heard Paul speak about the resurrection of the dead, some laughed ... but some believed” (Acts 17:32, 34).⁹

The Gospel is about a choice. Everyone faces that choice. A decision to believe or not. Perhaps you’re not a Christian at this point in your life. Maybe you’ve ignored God and just not interested. Or maybe you made up your mind a long time ago and said, “I’m not buying it.” Or maybe you have a lot of questions. That’s fine, we all do. But as you process your questions, think about this.

There is a God, and He is speaking to you. And He wants you to know how much He loves you. But you – like me and like every other person in the world – have made choices and done things that have offended God, have broken His laws, and left you separated and estranged from Him. And it breaks His heart.

It breaks His heart so much that He sent His son into this world to show you how much He loves you. And Jesus loves you so much that He gave His life for you. He died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sin. He died in your place to make things right between you and God. But that’s not all.

Amazingly and miraculously, Jesus rose from the dead proving to be the Son of God and proving that everything He said is true. And what did He say? “That whoever believes in Me shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16, NAS). He said, “I am the way, the truth, and life, no one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6, NAS).

And all you have to do is believe. The Bible says, “Confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, and you shall be saved” (Romans 10:9, NAS). Believe how? Not just in your head, but “believe in your heart.”

And the moment you do, you will be forgiven of everything you have ever done wrong, you will experience peace with God and peace within, you will become a child of God and He will become your Father, and you will have the hope and assurance of one day seeing Jesus face to face and living with Him forever in heaven.

Most of us believe, so what's the purpose of this message for us? To go back to the Scripture, back to the early church, and to hear the Gospel as it was first proclaimed. What's the purpose of this message? *To confirm what we believe and to declare what we believe.*

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NOTES

¹ Video comparing the religious views of Ron Reagan, Bill Maher, and Marco Rubio. “Some laughed ... some believed.”

² See Albert Mohler, “You Are Bringing Strange Things to Our Ears,” Christian Apologetics for a Postmodern Age, www.almohler.org, July 2006.

³ John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts*, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), page 277.

⁴ Bob Deffinbaugh, “The Apostle in Athens, Preaching to Philosophers (Acts 17:15-34),” www.bible.org.

⁵ See Stott, page 287.

⁶ The Greek word is χλευάζω (*chleuazo*), to mock, jeer, joke, to make fun of. The NIV is “sneered.” The NAS is “scoff.” The ESV is “mocked.” The NLT is “laughed.”

⁷ Verses on repentance – Matthew 4:17, Luke 5:32, 13:3, 15:10, Acts 2:38, 3:19, 2 Peter 3:9.

⁸ Verses on faith in Christ – John 1:12, 3:16, 6:47, Acts 16:30-31, Romans 5:1, Ephesians 2:8-9.

⁹ The two thieves on the cross, on either side of Jesus, represent the two options. One sneered and one believed. As in Matthew 7, where Jesus talked about two gates and two paths, there are two options from which to choose.