

Paul Facing Intellectuals

Պօղոս Կը Դիմագրաւէ Մատաւորականներ

Acts 17

Have you been in a situation where you are with a crowd that is not necessarily Christian? During the time together there would be conversations about sports, politics, music, economy, life...etc. Gradually you would start feeling uncomfortable when the conversations are about values not necessarily the same yours. What would you do? Would you remain silent? Would you want to speak out and express your values based on your Christian faith?

I don't know what your answer will be. Our society has become very sensitive and not tolerant to hear each other. We are offended quickly; therefore, quickly we defend our ideas without listening to the other side, or we remain silent thinking we can offend someone, so we rather be silent.

It is wise to pray and think before we open our mouth.

How can we share the Good News of the Gospel?

Don't answer quickly. Last Sunday badveli Jason called on the church to **keep our eyes open**. Open for what? Open to see what is going on. Open to be challenged to be instruments of God; open to love; open to care; open to see opportunities to share the Gospel.

-Do we need Godly wisdom to do that? Oh yes... and today's message is to see how Paul, Timothy, Luke, and Silas are continuing their mission trip from city to city and how God is giving to Paul wisdom regarding when to talk, how to talk, to whom to talk.

Three cities:

-Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9)

Paul and Silas were beaten in Philippi. Finally, and after apology from the ruling authorities, they got released from the jail in Philippi. They traveled another thirty-five miles to **Thessalonica**, the largest city and the provincial capital of Macedonia. "Thessalonica was the most important city in Macedonia and became its capital city. The name Thessalonica was borrowed from the sister of Alexander the Great. Her husband renamed this ancient city in honor of his wife, Thessali. Her name was given to her by her father, Philip of Macedon, after he won a very important military battle in that area."¹

Unlike Philippi, Thessalonica had a Jewish population large enough to support a synagogue. It seems they stayed three weeks, we read:

“Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead.” (17:2,3 NIV)

Here we have a Jewish audience. Paul uses the OT quotes to explain who Jesus is, why he came, why he suffered, according to the Scriptures.

-It is important to notice that Paul finds a common ground with his audience to start his sermon.

-The **theme “suffering Messiah”** is odd to the Jewish audience. It is strange that they do not remember all those passages from Isaiah and the other writings about Suffering Servant of God.

Paul, who also was suffering, could identify with Christ’s suffering for us. Some Jews believed, and even some large numbers of Greeks who followed Yahweh believed as well.

-Opposition always shows up. They brought a **marketplace mob** to create a riot in the city against Paul and Silas. They took Jason (who was a follower of Jesus) for interrogation accusing that those men disturbed the peace (disturbing the *Pax Romana*) and “turning the world upside down”.

So Paul and Silas left the city at night with the help of the local believers.

-Berea (present-day Verria). Acts (17:10-15)

“Berea was not as important a city as Philippi and Thessalonica, but it was a Greek-speaking town unlike the western towns that belonged to the section known as ‘free Macedonia.’”²

Paul and Silas went to the synagogue. The Jewish people of Berea were more polite than those in other cities. Once again, Paul carefully preaches from the OT Hebrew Scriptures to establish that **“it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead.”** Then tells the story of Jesus of Nazareth. Finally, he identifies the Jesus of history with the Christ of Scripture, boldly declaring, **“This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.”**

-They accepted the message, and wanted to check Paul’s OT quotes and see if there were true. Here also we find Greek people who knew Yahweh and they believed as well, men and women.

-Again the opposition came from Thessalonica to create problems. **“Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.”** (Acts 17:15 NIV11)

-Athens (Acts:16-30)

“It is an ancient Greek city. Pagans built altars there in high places for worship. In Greece, the high place or high city was called the **acropolis**. From *acro*, which means “height”, we get the words such as “acrobatics”, and *polis* is the word for “city.” The high city was the place where the chief deity resided.”³

If you go to Athens today the first thing you will see is **Acropolis**, the temple of Athena.

-So Paul finally arrives to city of philosophy. This is city of Aristotle, Plato... and so on.

-It is also the city of gods, “It was easier to find a god in the city of Athens than it was to find a man.”⁴

We read that Paul was not there to visit curiously and to admire the beauty of the city of Athens.

“While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” (Acts 17:16 NIV11)

This term “**distressed**” in Greek is a term equivalent to the word in the OT to describe **God’s righteous anger** and indignation over **Israel’s idolatry** (Isa 65:2-3; Deut. 9:7, 18; 32:19; Ps 106:28-29).

-Paul reasoned (spoke, preached) in the synagogue as usual.

-But also, he went to the city market, where he met: **“a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him.”** (18)

Who were those two schools of philosophy?

Briefly, the Epicureans held a theory according to which the world and the gods were a long way away from one another with little or no communication. The result was that one should get on with life as best one could, discovering how to gain maximum pleasure from a quiet, sedate existence.

“Achieve pleasure, avoid pain: if it feels good, it is good.”(hedonistic culture)

The Stoics however, believed that divinity lay within the present world and within each human being, so that this divine force, though hardly personal, could be discovered and harnessed. Good human living then (“virtue”) consisted in getting in touch with, and living according to, this inner divine “rationality.”⁵

I wonder how Paul presented the gospel to people who don’t know the **Hebraic Scriptures**. It seems they like to hear new ideas. **(All the Athenians and the**

foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas). (21)

Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” (19-20)

What is Areopagus?

It is a court where the council is about 100 highly respected members who exercise jurisdiction in matters of morality and will examine new gods, cults, ideas, philosophies...

Please notice how Paul preached:

“People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

²⁴ “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

²⁹ “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. ³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:22b-31 NIV11)

Please notice how Paul approaches this audience. He enters their world and creates a bridge to gain their attention. He recognizes that they are religious.

However, he also observes that there is one altar for the UNKNOWN GOD. And he thinks he could use that to introduce the true God. **“TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. (17:23b).**

You see, they confess their own ignorance.

No OT quotes. (They cannot relate with that)
So he starts from their logic and their “religion.”

1. God is Creator of the Universe (v. 24, 27)⁶

Epicureans don't believe in a personal God who is the Creator, and Stoics believe the divine is in all of us. Paul goes further, that God created everything. He draws the picture of the true God, who is transcendent and all powerful, creator...but God is not detached from his creation...God is personal (**“he is not far from any one of us” vs 27**). It is crazy to think that God is in a building.

2. God is the Sustainer of Life (v. 25)

God did not just create the universe, he is involved by sustaining it. He does not need us, we need Him.

3. God is the Sovereign Ruler of all Nations (vv. 26-27a)

This God, Creator, is also the God of all nations. That was odd for the Greeks. They considered themselves above all other nations. All humanity, all nations came from the same man, therefore no nation has superiority.

Paul is explaining why God created humans, so that they seek Him and find Him and have fellowship with Him.

4. God is the Father of all Human Beings (vv. 27b-29)

Paul stresses that the God the Creator, the transcendent God is also not far from us. He is near to us because we are his children created in His image. So, we should not decrease the image of God and make him in gold, silver, and stone... Don't limit God...

Then Paul quotes from their poet Epimenides and Artus, and gives new meaning. If we are all created by God's offspring, that means he created us, we are his workmanship, we should not create gods...

5. Conclusion: God is our Judge (vv. 30-31)

“In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” (30) I think Paul is saying, “God gave us a chance when we were ignorant. Now that we know, He calls us for repentance.” Without using the name of Jesus, he preaches about the Judgement Day by a “man” who was raised from the dead.

N.T. Wright concludes:

“And it is resurrection which explains why Jesus is the coming judge. It isn’t anything so trivial as that the resurrection demonstrates Jesus’ divinity, or even his human superiority, and thus qualifies him for this particularly tricky task. Rather, it is that with the resurrection of Jesus God’s new world has begun; in other words, his being raised from the dead is the start, the paradigm case, the foundation, the beginning, of that great setting-right which God will do for the whole cosmos at the end. The risen body of Jesus is the one bit of the physical universe that has already been ‘set right’. Jesus is therefore the one through whom everything else will be ‘set right’.”⁷

Application:

1. We are called to see the need, pray and act

Someone from our church who was having discussion with me about our church mentioned that often we don’t see the urgency to share the gospel with people. It is urgent to share, and if we know the truth, we should share.

2. Paul found a topic that can be mutual to discuss.

With Hebrew people OT

With Greek people their philosophy

Please be wise when you make discussions about God, Jesus. Use terms that people can understand and relate.

Take topic of Love. Everyone talks about love. What is love?

What is life? Where are coming from? Where are we going?

Unfortunately in our schools our kids hear every day that we are result of cosmic accident, we are created by chance, atoms came next to each other by chance, and we are moving towards nothingness at the end.

How sad is this. We exist and we end our existence in meaningless life.

Let me end with Paul writing to church of Corinth

²⁶ Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise;

God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.²⁸ God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are,²⁹ so that no one may boast before him.³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.³¹ Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.” (1 Cor 1:26-31 NIV)

1. R.C. Sproul, *You Will Be My Witness to the End of the Earth Acts* P265
2. Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary, Acts* P 460
3. R.C. Sproul, *You Will Be My Witness to the End of the Earth Acts* P270
4. R.C. Sproul, *You Will Be My Witness to the End of the Earth Acts* P270
5. N.T. Wright. *Acts for Everyone (Part two)* P 83,84
6. The main ideas from pastor Brian Morgan, *Paul Among the Philosophers* PBCC Sermon, 05/20/2018
7. N.T. Wright. *Acts for Everyone (Part two)* P 93