

## Gospel Triumph: Gospel Confrontation – Acts 17:16-34 (Part 2)

One of the things we can say for sure about Paul's speech here in Acts 17 is that it is very relevant to the people he was speaking to. And it remains relevant for us today some 2000 years later. This word, "relevant" is a word you hear often in a variety of different arenas. How do we stay relevant in business, for example. Relevance is also something many pursue in Christian ministry and even though we pursue it, we very often fail. Listen to how Christian author Os Guinness put this almost 25 years ago in his book *Prophetic Untimeliness*. *"Never have Christians pursued relevance more strenuously; never have Christians been more irrelevant."*

Why do we come up short and remain unable to speak clearly and helpfully into the culture around us? In other words, why is the church so often irrelevant and not taken seriously? Guinness continues.

*"Let's be crystal clear at the outset. Relevance is not the problem. If relevance is properly understood – the quality of relating to a matter in hand with pertinence and appropriateness – we who define ourselves and our lives by the good news of Jesus Christ should be, of all people, most relevant... The gospel is good news. In fact it is 'the best news ever' because it addresses our human condition appropriately, pertinently, and effectively as nothing else has, does, or can – and in generation after generation, culture after culture, and life after life."* – Os Guinness

So how does the church maintain the ability to speak clearly into the culture and into the lives of those around us? How do we remain pertinent, and have something of value to offer to hurting people? We stick to the simple and timeless message given to us in Scripture. We stay rigorously committed to the gospel.

Paul is in a new culture situation in Athens, but he stays committed to the same message of the gospel. It's certainly given in a unique and fresh way that addresses the specific issues in Athens. But the core message remains the same. And we'll get to his message this morning in Acts 17. Last week we began studying Acts 17:16-34 and here's what we are looking at. **3 Parts of the Gospel's Confrontation with Unbelief.**

### **1. The Pervasive Problem (vv. 16-21)**

We spent all of last week in these verses, so I won't give a lot of attention to them this morning. But it's important to remember the core issue that Paul confronts here in Athens. It's unbelief in the one true God and commitment to worshipping false gods in the form of idols. Look at verse 16. As Paul began to interact with those around him, he received an invitation to present his faith in a more formal and public setting. Look at verse 19. Paul accepted this invitation and proceeded to give one of the most memorable speeches in Acts. Let's turn to this speech now.

## **2. The Prophetic Perspective (vv. 22-31)**

I call this the prophetic perspective because a prophet speaks the truth into a situation whether that truth is popular and well received or not. Paul begins by describing what he has noticed while living in Athens. Look at verse 22.

Is Paul commending them here? Not necessarily. One author said this could be translated, "I see that you make a great display of piety." In other words, they do have a level of commitment to worshipping their gods, but Paul gives a further explanation as to why he says they are religious. Look at verse 23.

They had even gone to the lengths of putting up an altar to "the unknown god". For the Athenians, they worshiped all of these gods to try and appease them and get things from them. They were hoping to not suffer their wrath and the altar to the unknown god was an attempt to appease any gods they had missed. It's a way of saying, "Hey, sorry we missed you! We would worship you if we just knew about you."

Paul uses this as a connection point and tells them that he's going to fill them in. Look at the end of verse 23. They had missed the one true God! Verse 24 begins the heart of Paul's speech here and we can divide his speech into 3 parts. In verse 24-25 he talks about God. In verse 26-29 he talks about human beings and in verses 30-31 he calls for a response of repentance and faith. It's quite simple in structure, but the argument he makes is deep and profound.

He tells them in verse 23 that he's going to proclaim the one true God to them and he does this in verses 24-25. He's going to correct their wrong understanding

of God. So, what specifically does he say about God? Look at verse 24. He makes two positive points about God in verse 24 and one negative. The one true God is the creator of all things. He made the world and everything in it. All that you see around you was created by this God. But he didn't just create it, he rules over it. He's Lord of heaven and earth, which is a way of saying everything.

This God, who made everything is very different from the way the Athenians have understood deity. Look at the end of verse 24. He doesn't live in temples made by humans. And this is because of what Paul gets to in verse 25.

Humans don't give anything to this God. They don't contribute anything to His existence because He's the one who gives everything to everyone. All begins with Him and overflows to creation and to human beings.

This is an entirely different picture of God than the Athenians had and of most of the world today. Here's the essential logic of verses 24-25. God creates all and rules over all, but He does this out of love and grace. That word "giver" in verse 25 is so important to grasping God's character. All of creation is a gift. Here's how a couple of authors put this:

*"God did not have to create, nor did God create within a context of constraining conditions. That God creates at all is, therefore, a sign of a divine, hospitable intention for others to be. God creates ex amore, from love, because love is the only reason at work in God's creating action."* - Norman Wizba

*"This stands in stark contrast to the stories of creation from the ancient Near East, in which the world and human frequently emerge from conflict and animosity among warring gods or to serve the self-centered purposes of the gods. In contrast to these portrayals, in his **Paradise** Dante completes his journey by beholding the loving Creator full of light, saying, 'My will and my desire were turned by love, the love that moves the sun and other stars.'" - Dennis Hollinger*

Creation happens because of God's love and therefore, everything in creation is a result of love and grace. And you see this in Paul's contrast of the true living God to the gods of the idols in verse 25. We do not contribute anything to God. He's

self-sufficient and the giver of all. This is why He alone is worthy of worship and praise. This is why He is Lord. James 1:17.

And in His grace and kindness, He has created human beings and created us for a purpose. And this is where Paul goes next. Look at verse 26. All humans come from one man and woman. This would have challenged the Greek belief in the uniqueness of their culture. And God created us for a purpose. Look at verse 27.

Now, make sure you understand what Paul is doing in verse 27. He's giving the ultimate purpose for humans, to seek God, know God, and worship God. Listen to Jeremiah 9:23-24 and Philippians 3:7-8. You are made to know the one true God. This is your ultimate purpose and greatest good.

*"Once you become aware that the main business that you are here for is to know God, most of life's problems fall into place of their own accord...What makes life worth while is having a big enough objective, something which catches our imagination and lays hold of our allegiance; and this the Christian has, in a way that no other man has. For what higher, more exalted, and more compelling goal can there be than to know God?" - J.I. Packer*

But it's also vital that you notice in verse 27 that the language He uses paints the picture of an impossible task for humans in our sinful and broken condition. Some translations use the phrase "grope their way toward Him" in this verse.

The point is that God has made us to know Him and worship Him, and we live in darkness and just cannot find Him on our own. But even so, God is not far from us. Look at the end of 27 and verse 28.

In verse 28 Paul quotes two different Greek poets. Remember the context. Humans are groping for God and seeking to know Him in some ways and these poets are an example of this. We know certain truths, and these poets got some things right, but then we suppress the truth in our unrighteousness. So Paul takes their words and uses them to point to the real truth of Christianity. We do live in the presence of God and we are His children.

And yet, we have gone continued, like the Athenians to go about this in the wrong way. Look at verse 29. It's at this point that Paul moves back to the pervasive

problem with humans. We manufacture and worship idols and created things rather than the one true God. This is despite the reality of who God is. So, what is the result and how should we respond to our failure to honor God and our propensity to worship idols? Verses 30-31 give us the answer. Look at verse 30.

You see what Paul is doing here with the word "ignorance"? They have been worshiping a god they did not know, and Paul has now revealed the nature and authority of this God to them. They are no longer ignorant. God in His grace, has given them knowledge to respond properly.

And why should they repent? Look at verse 31. Some have claimed that Paul didn't really speak of Jesus or present the gospel in this speech. But you have to keep in mind that Paul has already been proclaiming Christ and the resurrection in the marketplace. Listen again to verse 18. Luke is only giving us a summary of Paul's speech and Paul begins to turn the attention back to Jesus and the resurrection here in verse 31.

Paul has essentially told the Athenians that their beliefs about God and their idol worship are wrong. They are made to know the one true God, but their darkened hearts are keeping them from Him as they remain committed to their unbelief. They need to repent and turn to the man who rose from the dead or face the judgment of the one true God, creator of heaven and earth. He loves His creation and will not allow His name to be defamed forever.

Paul has carefully and intentionally proclaimed the true nature of God while also confronting the false beliefs of those in Athenian culture. Now the Spirit must work through the Word to bring about salvation.

*"There is an inner logic to idolatry, but there is also a deep addiction to the domestication of God by the human heart. Those addictions can be broken only by the power of the Holy Spirit."* – Richard Lints

And mercifully that does happen.

### **3. The Particular Profit (vv. 32-34)**

Look at verses 32-34. Some reject, some believe, but the gospel remains relevant and effective according to the power of God.

So, let's remain relevant by sticking to the same message that Paul believed and preached a long time ago and trusting God to do the work in us and through us. Let's pray.