

Engaging Our Culture (The Road 9/3/17)

Acts 17:16-34

Introduction

One of the great challenges for the Church is how do we relate to our culture in the world around us. Every generation, every nation, every, people group has a culture. When we talk about Culture, we're talking about the shared attitudes, values, beliefs, goals, and behaviors of a people group. The world around us has a culture. And the question is, "How do we relate to it?" The problem is, outside the Church, if culture was a river it would be flowing away from God and not to him. So often times, as the Church, and as individual believers, we find ourselves swimming upstream in the culture that surrounds us. And that isn't easy.

There are two ditches for us to avoid when we think about culture. 1.) Some Christians isolate themselves from the culture. With good intentions, we separate ourselves from the world so we won't be affected by the sin of the world. There are two main problems with that. The first problem with separating ourselves from the surrounding culture is that we separate ourselves from the people in our culture – people who desperately need the gospel. That's not what Christ or Paul did. The second problem that comes with separating ourselves from our culture to avoid the sin of the culture, is that we have our own sin. We don't escape sin by escaping our culture. Christians who isolate themselves from the world wind up being eaten alive by their own self-righteousness or by discovering that the sin they thought they were protecting themselves from is often just as serious inside our ranks as it is outside.

But there's another ditch we need to avoid. 2.) Instead of isolating themselves from culture they compromise with it. So in other words, they stop swimming upstream against the current of culture, they give in and go along with it. One of the greatest examples right now is the ongoing gay sexual revolution. Just a few short years ago even some of the most progressive social and political leaders were not in favor of gay marriage. But now the tide has changed, and if you actually think that God's gift of sex is only ever to be practiced inside the confines of a lifelong marital commitment between one man and one woman, they you're considered something worse than a Neanderthal. And here's what's happening for many so called Churches and Christians... Instead of lovingly and compassionately holding to the teaching of Scripture, they're compromising their beliefs to fit in with the current of the culture of the age.

In Acts 17, God shows us a third way to relate to culture. The Apostle Paul doesn't isolate himself from culture or compromise with it. He patiently, lovingly, and wisely engages culture. That's what we're going to see today, a good example for us how to engage with our culture. I want us to look at Paul's heart, Paul's Approach, and Paul's message.

Paul's Heart – what enabled Paul to engage culture?

Paul splits up with Silas, Timothy, and Luke and he comes to Athens which was the intellectual and philosophical capital of the world. Athens had been the home of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and continued on in a rich tradition of higher education, and the arts.

Paul comes to Athens and is deeply moved by what he sees. It's not Athens' impressive architecture or its world class art. **v. 16 tells us that when Paul saw that the city was full of idols, his spirit was provoked** (some translations say stirred or distressed). One ancient writer said that it was easier to find a god than to find a man in Athens. Athens was filled with temples, shrines, and statues dedicated to the gods. In the Parthenon there was a gargantuan statue of Athena. It was said that his gleaming spear point could be seen from 40 miles away. There were also images of Apollo, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Bacchus, and Diana. Statues of all the Greek gods were made out of gold, silver, ivory, and marble by the finest Greek sculptors.

Paul sees all of this and he is deeply moved, his spirit was provoked. Paul is disturbed because all of the honor and glory that was due to Christ was being given to false idols. Paul had great zeal for God's glory and that he and he alone should be worshiped. Who remembers the first of the 10 Commandments? **Thou shalt have no other gods before me.** The first commandment is the foundational commandment that all the others were based on. The Athenians weren't just placing one idol above God but they worshiped an entire pantheon of gods.

But I want you to see something. Paul was filled with indignation over the idolatry in Athens. But here's the interesting thing. It was the kind of indignation that led him to have compassion on the Athenians and a great concern for their souls. Paul didn't lash out in anger against them. He didn't rail against them or insult them. **Seeing their idolatry caused Paul to move toward them in love.**

Tim Keller said that Paul was the kind of "man who thought so highly of God, and so highly of people that he wanted to see them in each other's arms." I want you to see that Paul didn't come to this place in his life easily. If you remember earlier in his life he was literally persecuting the early Christians that he didn't agree with. He was having them arrested and put to death because he was so zealous for his religion. We need to see what a transformative work the gospel has done in him. Truly knowing Christ has made him into the kind of man who loves his enemies. And he can't rest until he has shared the love of Jesus with them. Now, on this side of the cross, Paul doesn't know how to relate to people unless he's pouring himself out in love for them, even to the point great risk and personal harm.

Paul's Approach

As Luke points out over and over, Paul continued to reason with the Jews in the synagogues. But in Athens, the focus is on Paul's interaction with the gentiles. Verse 17 says that he was in the marketplace every day reasoning and conversing with the people he came into contact with. When we see the word **"marketplace"** we might think of a shopping mall or something like that. But this is something much different. Even in the large cities of the world there's really nothing like the ancient marketplace in Athens. The marketplace was usually in the center of town and surrounding it were the courts, the schools, the theaters, the stores, and the religious temples. This was before cable news channels or the internet. If you wanted to get the latest news you went to the marketplace. The marketplace was to the ancient world what Hollywood, the media, Social media, Washington D.C. and all of our ivy league schools combined

would be to us today. It's where the culture was. It's where culture was formed. And Paul goes there. The marketplace was where Socrates would go to give lectures and debate.

Paul goes there. And he respectfully and patiently reasons with and has conversations with people
v. 17 says that "he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection."

Acts 17 mentions 2 groups of Philosophers – The Epicureans and the Stoics

The Epicureans believed that meaning in life was found in your own personal happiness and pleasure

The Stoics taught that meaning in life was found in living in submission to and in harmony with nature so that your emotions were always in check regardless of your circumstances.

The way that Paul interacted with the philosophers gained him a hearing at the Areopagus. The Areopagus was the formal council of Athens. There was an incredible hunger for knowledge in Athens, especially for new perspectives.

So Paul standing in the midst of the Aeropagus and I want you to see what he's going to do. He's not going to turn to Scripture, even though everything he is going to say is scriptural. ***He's going to enter the framework of their cultural world view and he's going to show them on the basis of their own belief system that the gospel is only philosophical principle that gives meaning to life.***

The way he does that is by going after their idols.

v. 22 Men, I perceive that in every way you are very religious

v. 23 And altar to the unknown god

They had made an altar to every imaginable god they could think of, and in case they had somehow missed one, they made an altar to one they didn't even know.

Paul is here to proclaim that the only god they don't know is the one true and living God over all things.

In our culture I'm not sure if we're more or less sophisticated about our idols. On the one hand we don't fashion idols out of wood, stone, or gold. But on the other hand our culture has created at least as many if not more idols. We create idols with our hearts. I think it was John Calvin who said that "*man's nature is a perpetual factory of idols.*" In our hearts and minds we're very gifted at making anything and idol. We even take good things and make them idols. An idol can be anything. An idol is anything we look to more than God for our joy, peace, security, and meaning.

There are some tests we can give ourselves to figure out what our idols are.

What makes you angry?

Do you get more angry with your children when they misbehave in public than they do when you're at home? Maybe you have a self image idol.

Do you have trouble saying no to people? Maybe you have a human approval idol?

What's your greatest nightmare? What's the one thing that if you lost it then you would be lost and wouldn't even want to keep living?

If the answer to that question is anything except Jesus and his love, then you've probably found your idol.

Your spouse can be your idol, your kids, your job, your reputation...

If any of those things are more central to your happiness and peace than Christ and his love than that thing has become an idol.

What are the prevalent idols of our culture?

A successful life?

A comfortable life?

Our family status in the community?

For ordinary people, sometimes I think that we idolize a calm, peaceful, life with financial security.

Paul knew the idols in his culture and he knew how to engage them. Paul understood that in order to reach his culture, he needed to expose the Athenians idols and show them how that Christ and Christ alone is the only source of lasting joy, peace, security, and happiness.

The religious and idolatrous nature of man is rooted in the fact that we are created for worship, but sin has ***highjacked our affections*** and directs them toward false gods that can never satisfy us. Again, it was Tim Keller who said, "Idols are the kinds of things that if you fail them, they will never forgive you. And if you get them, they will never satisfy you."

So Paul enters their framework, even quoting their own poets, in order to put his finger on their idols and show them how Christ and the gospel is the answer to every question they have.

Paul's God

With the Jews, Paul started with the Bible because that was the common denominator they had with truth. But in Athens, these people didn't have the Scriptures as a basis for their understanding. So Paul starts with what they do have in common in order to lead them to Christ. So Paul starts with Creation and he gives them a message about the nature of God.

What are the things Paul taught them about God – this is the sheer genius of Paul. He knows the false gods can't deliver on their promises. So he teaches them about the one true and living God.

v. 24 Creator of all things – this is something that all men have in common – God is our creator

We are created in his image

Because we are created in his image we do not have the right to create our own gods

v. 24 Lord of all things – all people owe God their allegiance and obedience

v. 30 He commands all men everywhere to repent (On the basis of his deity and his lordship)

Why?

He will judge the world

Philippians 2:8-11 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

On that day there will be two kinds of people – All will bow their knee to king Jesus, some will bow willingly and some will be made to bow.

Some will have their sins washed in the blood of the lamb and some will bear the penalty of their sins forever.

Conclusion

1. Have you every really thought about our culture before and what it means to engage it? I'm afraid that we're all very tempted to be so caught up in the cares of this world, over things that don't last that we give very little time to think about eternal realities that will affect us and the people around us forever. Is it possible that we have made ourselves so busy with things that don't matter eternally, that we barely have the time or mental energy to think about perishing souls?

2. Have you thought about our culture's idols and what makes the hearts and minds of the people around us tick? Have you thought about your own idols and the areas you are prone to seek happiness and security apart from Christ?

3. Have you come to see that Christ and his gospel are the answer to every longing of the human heart?

4. Has your heart been transformed by the power of the gospel, to the point that you have such a high view of God and a high view of people that you long to see them both in each other's arms?

5. Maybe you're here today and the gospel has gone out and the God's command to repent has come to your ears for the very first time. If that's true of you let me give you two promises of Scripture the first from John the Baptist and the second from Jesus.

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

John 6:37 All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.