

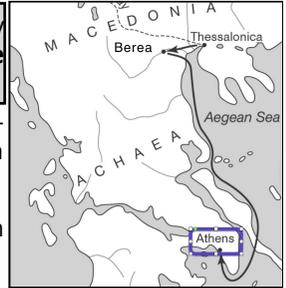


A friend has been diagnosed with terminal cancer. *Will* you approach to share the Gospel? *How* will you approach? Today we discover wise tactics as we confront contemporary culture with the ancient Gospel.

Acts 17:16 (NET) ¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them [Silas & Timothy - v.15) in Athens, his spirit was greatly upset because **he saw the city was full of idols.**

Athens was a city full of idols - statues of gods & goddesses. Way before Paul ever entered the city proper, he would likely have seen many of Athen's temples on the acropolis.

- Statue of Athena (for whom the city is named after) constructed on the Acropolis that rose almost 50 feet high.²
- Athens was known not nearly as much for it's commerce as it's religious pluralism. Ancient authors have guessed that there were 30,000 idols in the town. *Pausanias*, a Greek traveler and geographer in the 2nd century, noted that it was easier to meet a god or goddess on the main street of Athens than to meet a man.³



So WHY was Paul **greatly upset**? If the Gospel message of Jesus was true, then all these people were being deceived. Think of all the time, effort, & resources these people had invested for something that WASN'T TRUE!

If Jesus rose from the dead, we can trust what He said. According to Jesus, there is no other God. Therefore any other claim to divinity is nothing more than a **deception**. And THIS is what made Paul sick in his spirit. These people desperately needed to hear the truth. And so, Paul begins where he always begins - at the synagogue.

Acts 17:17 (NET) ¹⁷ So he was addressing the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles in the synagogue, and in the marketplace every day those who happened to be there.

We know Paul's tactic with the Jews: SHOW them from the Scripture that Jesus is the Messiah. Yet, as we're about to see, Paul couldn't use the same tactic with those who DID NOT believe the Scriptures. Today we learn 2 principles from Paul in sharing the Gospel with our culture:

BIG TRUTH: Present the Gospel tactically & truthfully.

After leaving the synagogue he would go to the **marketplace** to look for opportunities to share the gospel of Jesus. This was his **every day** practice in Athens.

² Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*: 15:1–23:35, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 2573.

³ R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire, Preaching the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), 230.

Acts 17:18 (NET) ¹⁸ Also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him, and some were asking, "What does this foolish babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods." (They said this because he was proclaiming the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.)

- **Epicurean** philosophy: the gods were far off and had little influence in the real world. They wanted to avoid pain and amplify pleasure. At death, they simply ceased to be so there was no concern about judgment nor salvation.⁴ You live, you die, game over.
- **Stoic philosophers:** pantheists - sort of like the creatures in **Avatar** who view God as flowing through all things - trees, animals, people. They focused on living harmoniously with nature while emphasizing human reason & self-sufficiency.⁵ They DID believe that this God-life force had a fate that governed all people.⁶

Some of these philosophers called Paul a **foolish babbler** - a word picture for people who picked up scraps of information from all over & claimed the info as their own⁷ - a sort of philosophical plagiarism.

Acts 17:19-21 (NET) ¹⁹ So they took Paul and brought him to the Areopagus [the advisory council of Athens], saying, "May we know what this **new teaching** is that you are proclaiming?" ²⁰ For you are bringing some surprising things to our ears, so we want to know what they mean." ²¹ (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there used to spend their time in nothing else than telling or listening to something new.)

These folks were looking for **something new** all the time, without any real foundation to anchor to.

Warning: It's good to want to learn & discover new things, **but we must be careful not to drift away from the anchor of the Gospel message.** It is THAT message that Paul is about to share with the Athenians, but first he took a tactical & practical approach. Paul didn't use 'Christianese' - Christian terms that the culture wouldn't understand. Instead, Paul studied the culture and found a way to communicate effectively. Here's the reality: good communicators need to answer SO WHAT before the audience will ask, "NOW WHAT?"

BIG TRUTH: Present the Gospel tactically & truthfully.

Paul starts with THEIR culture builds a bridge to the TRUTH of the GOSPEL.

Acts 17:22-23 ²² So Paul stood before the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I see that you are very religious in all respects."²³ For as I went around and observed closely your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: **'To an unknown god.'** Therefore what you worship without knowing it, this I proclaim to you. Therefore what you worship without knowing it, this I proclaim to you.

Why a statue to an **unknown god**? The Athenians were likely making sure not to upset any deities by forgetting them. So Paul uses THIS reality as his tactical foothold.

⁴ Craig S. Keener, Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: 15:1-23:35, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 2591.

⁵ John B. Polhill, Acts, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 366-367.

⁶ William J. Larkin Jr., Acts, vol. 5, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), Ac 17:16.

⁷ David G. Peterson, The Acts of the Apostles, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 490.

They wanted to KNOW what they didn't know. But regarding this god they were (*ágnōstos*) "Agnostic" = No knowledge.

And with that this Jewish man, Roman citizen, & Greek-speaker, points these religious folks to the **unknown God**, the ONLY TRUE GOD.

Acts 17:24-29 ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by human hands,²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives life and breath and everything to everyone. ²⁶ From one man he made every nation of the human race to inhabit the entire earth, determining their set times and the fixed limits of the places where they would live,²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope around for him and find him, though **he is not far from each one of us.** ²⁸ For in him we live and move about and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'²⁹ So since we are God's offspring, we should not think the deity is like gold or silver or stone, an image made by human skill and imagination.

This **God** is the creator of ALL things, **Lord of heaven and earth.** And far from being distant & detached, as taught by the Epicureans, the TRUE GOD is intimately involved with creation & circumstances. HE is the reason WHY they live and WHERE they live.

Paul is turning up the temperature in the temple.

- Remember how the **Stoics** thought God was in all things - plants, animals, people, human reason? Paul uses their own writings to demonstrate that GOD created people in HIS image. Any attempt to create God in OUR image is a gross exaggeration & idolatrous mistake.
- Remember how the **Epicureans** didn't worry about judgement in the afterlife because they thought there wasn't one? That one's fixing to go down in flames too.

Acts 17:30-31 ³⁰ Therefore, although God has overlooked such times of ignorance, he now commands all people everywhere to **repent**,³¹ because he has set a day on which he is going to judge the world in righteousness, by a man whom he designated, having provided proof to everyone by raising him from the dead."

If the Gospel message is true, then - like it or not - judgment is coming. Are you ready?

3 responses to the Gospel message; the same 3 responses we can expect to see in our day.

Acts 17:32-34 ³² Now when they heard about the resurrection from the dead, some began to scoff, but others said, "We will hear you again about this." ³³ So Paul left the Areopagus.³⁴ But **some people joined him and believed.** Among them were Dionysius, who was a member of the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

We are not responsible for the response.

We are responsible to present the Gospel tactically & truthfully.