



“Apologetics”  
Acts 17:22-34  
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*\*This original sermon was not written by A.I.*

Following along with Pastor Paul, we are in the Book of Acts in our series called “Church Afire”, and we’ve come to chapter 17. The Apostle Paul, formally called Saul, has become a zealot for Jesus and the Gospel. We continue now on his second missionary journey.



But before we move on, first a little review. Paul and Barnabas, sent by the church in Antioch, had traveled throughout the area known as Asia Minor, which we know today as Syria and Turkey, on their first missionary journey. As we have learned, it was Paul’s habit to go first to the synagogues where he preached to the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles who had converted to Judaism. Paul reasoned with them from the Gospel to convince them that salvation comes only by faith through grace. The Holy Spirit was powerfully with him and Barnabas, and they performed many signs and wonders. After that first missionary journey, they reported their excitement at the success of the Gospel message to the church in Antioch. But it wasn’t long before the circumcision controversy arose. Paul and Barnabas then went to Jerusalem and, as Pastor Paul told us in chapter fifteen, told the Apostles and Elders of the intransigence of those in the Circumcision Party. They traveled back to Antioch and informed the church of the immensely important decision of the Jerusalem Council, which made it possible for the Gospel to be spread throughout the Gentile world. Paul spent several months there in Antioch preaching to and teaching the Greek believers. As he was preparing to embark on his second missionary journey, he and Barnabas had a significant disagreement over whether to take John Mark with them. They split up and Silas accompanied Paul as he set out to revisit the churches in Asia Minor he had founded to encourage them and reinforce their faith in the Gospel. But, as we have learned, the Holy Spirit had other plans.

While traveling through Asia Minor and being prohibited from preaching the Gospel in that portion of their journey, Paul had a vision in which a man from Macedonia begged him to come there to share the Gospel message. They had been traveling north but changed plans and turned west toward Macedonia. They crossed the Aegean Sea to Macedonia in Europe in what is today northern Greece. They came to Philippi where Paul's preaching ultimately led to Lydia's conversion. We are told that the Lord opened her heart and she and her whole family were baptized. This reminds me of our need to let God open OUR hearts to receive the Gospel and be transformed by the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Amen? This is followed by Paul calling upon the Name of Jesus Christ, casting a demon out of a female slave, and the crowd welling up against them resulting in their being severely beaten with rods and thrown into prison. Throughout their missionary journeys, time and again, as the Gospel was preached, resistance arose from the conservative Jews. Indeed, in 2 Corinthians 11:24-25 Paul, in his second letter to the church in Corinth told them, "Five times I received from the Jews forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned. I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea". Despite these hardships, Paul thought of these sufferings as participation in the sufferings of Christ. Paul, the zealot, was now using that zealotness to spread the Gospel message.

Then they traveled on to Thessalonica. Recall that Paul preached first to the Jews and then the Gentiles, his goal being to convince them through Scripture that their path to salvation was through the Gospel led by the Holy Spirit rather than the insufficiency of the Law. I read in one commentary that it may have well been that the Holy Spirit guided them to pass by other towns because of a lack of Jewish synagogues there. As Pastor Paul observed last week, it may have been more likely that they were kept from stopping because God had a plan for them to fulfill in Athens and did not want them to delay en route. As was usually the case, some were convinced, and some were not. Opposition rose again, so they moved on to Berea. There, the Jews were more receptive. Day by day, they listened to Paul's preaching and examined the scriptures. Many there believed, including many prominent Greek women and men. Soon, some of the Jews from Thessalonica came to agitate the Bereans. For his safety, Paul was escorted to the coast and then to Athens.

The theological term used to describe Paul's use of this argument and defense methodology is called "Apologetics" and will be the focus of today's message. Apologetics is defined as the reasoned defense of religious doctrines, primarily Christianity, using evidence, philosophy, and scripture to respond to objections and establish the faith's credibility.

While in Athens, Paul, having been deeply grieved by seeing all the idols worshipped there, gave his famous sermon to those gathered in the Areopagus, a common meeting place for philosophers and debaters. We'll pick up today's scripture here as Paul delivers his rebuttal to the worship of the Greek gods. Please turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 17 beginning at verse 22.

**22** Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “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.

**32** When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.”

**33** At that, Paul left the Council.

**34** Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

This is the word of God for the people of God. ....Thanks be to God.

This is what is known as the Areopagus Sermon. Paul begins by acknowledging that the people of Athens were very religious. The problem was that they did not know the Creator God responsible for all things on earth and in the heavens above.

The Greeks of that day, and for that matter, all our church fathers, lacked the advantage of seeing the earth from space as our astronauts have. Have you listened to the way those who have spent time in space describe the Earth? The most common expressions I have seen or heard have attributed what they saw as beyond anything man can imagine. Often, they express that only God could have created something so amazing and something so vast as space and our planet, Earth.

Theologically, that falls into the category of General Revelation, defined as “the knowledge of god’s existence, power and divine nature disclosed to all humanity through nature, history and conscience.” The Greeks, it would seem, had encountered a general revelation that there was an unknown god, but that they did not really know Him. Paul sought to set them straight, if you will, that the God they did not know was the Creator of the universe.

But you might observe that neither did Paul have that advantage. Paul relied on faith just as we must. Paul did have the benefit of having experienced Christ face-to-face on the road to Damascus, as we read in Acts 9:4. Do you remember what Jesus said to Paul (then Saul) on that road? He said, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me”? Jesus went on to give Saul

incontrovertible evidence of His divinity and majesty. After having his sight taken and then restored, Saul could no longer deny Christ was who he said He was. What evidence do we need to believe? While it may not be likely that we'll have such a personal encounter with Christ, we do have the witness of Scripture, the written Word, a good portion of which was written by eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry. We also have in Scripture accounts of the Living Word, Christ Jesus. We, like Paul, live by faith too. Paul tells the Athenians that they are ignorant of the "Unknown God", the one they recognize exists but do not know. He then goes on to present a case for belief in the Creator God. He reasons and debates in the synagogue with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him in the Areopagus, also known as Mars Hill. They ridiculed him and asked, "What is this babbling trying to say? He seems to be advocating for foreign gods." Debating was almost the national pastime in Athens. They said he was espousing strange ideas, and they wanted to know what they meant. So, in the Areopagus, Paul began to explain that as he walked around Athens, he came across many idols, including one with the inscription, "To an Unknown God." He told them the "Unknown God" was real and the Creator of heaven and earth and everything in them. He told them God does not live in temples built by human hands. He said God does not need help from human hands, but rather He gives everyone life and breath and everything else. I believe that. A rhetorical question, "Do you?" Marinate on that for a moment. I pray that your answer is absolutely, "Yes!" Amen? He went on to tell them that from one man God made all nations and that they should spread out and inhabit the whole earth. God created us for relationships. He still seeks to have a relationship with all people, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender, race, or, yes, lifestyle. Our calling is to love our neighbor as ourselves. At times, that may be harder than it sounds. As we go through life, it's natural for us to most often put ourselves first. But if we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, then we must put others before ourselves. I certainly have failed to do that many times in my life.

It doesn't mean we don't care about ourselves. But it does mean we look for opportunities to help others wherever and whenever we can. This congregation does a pretty good job of that. We reach out through such things as New Focus, Christmas Wish, Angel Tree, and the hosting of twelve-step groups and the Boy Scouts. We respond to crises when they occur, and many other things. But we cannot sit on our laurels. We must continue to take seriously our commitment to be Jesus' hands and feet until He returns. We need to become aware of people's hunger, their worship of love, success, self, or maybe technology. We need to meet them unjudgmentally where they are and invite them into a relationship with the living God.

Paul, in his sermon, tells the Athenians that the God of Israel is the god of Creation. In verse 27, he tells them, "He is not far from each one of us." God is beyond temples and images but close enough to be sought and found. There is hope. Every human life is subject to God's revelation and judgment. Paul tells them (and us) to repent because God has set a day of judgment and has raised Jesus from the dead as proof. Repentance is not merely changing behavior; it is turning from idols (including ours) and returning to the living God.

So how did the people of Athens respond? Some sneered, calling resurrection a puppet show or nonsense. How do we respond? The Gospel message is difficult for some because it challenges their presuppositions. Others wanted to hear more. They were open to further conversations. I pray that we are. As another commentator said, "This is evangelistic gold, people who want to learn more." Finally, we are told in verse 34 that Dionysius and Damaris believed. This relates to us that both males and females came to believe. The Gospel crosses all social lines! So where do we go from here? I hope we learn that we need to meet people where they are. Make them feel

welcome. Start by sharing with them your belief in God's creation. Point to the things we see every day that shout out for a Creator having done the amazing things we see all around us. Share with them our need for repentance, recognizing we have not followed God's will for our lives. He seeks a relationship and reconciliation with all of us. He wants us to be reconciled to Himself, to ourselves, and those around us, and He wants us to be reconciled to nature, His creation. Indeed, He has given us a ministry of reconciliation. Like Paul, we are called to understand the world around us, meet people where they are, and point them to the God they are already searching for - even if they don't yet know His name.