

Reaching Out to the Traditionalists: Lessons from
Paul's Encounter with the Athenians
- Acts 17:16-34

By
Ps. A. F. Adetunji

1. Introduction

- Paul's message in Athens is a centerpiece for the entire book of Acts and provides insight into the heart and ministry of Paul.
- This is an example of how Paul evangelized Gentiles, who had virtually no background in Scripture.
- **Similar to the outreach to pagan Gentiles in Lystra (Acts 14:15-17).
- *It should be noted that in both cases, Paul started with **creation** and moves forward in the **redemptive story**.

2. Paul in Athens

- To learn from Paul's visit, let's look at:
- * what Paul **saw**,
- *what Paul **felt**,
*where Paul **went**, and
- *what Paul **said**.
- These points are related, and very important if we desire to imitate the apostle. A source put it thus:
- **We do not speak like Paul because we do not feel like Paul; this is because we do not see like Paul.**

Who is Who in Athens

- Athens had “who is who” in almost every category of western civilization.
- +Great Playwrights like **Aeschylus** (the father of tragedy) was there.
- +Athens was home to the fathers of history, **Herodotus** and **Thucydides**.
- +**Hippocrates**, who has been called “The Father of Western Medicine.” was an Athenian,
- +**Socrates**, the father of western philosophy, who taught **Plato**, who later taught **Aristotle** – each giant once graced the city of Athens.
- +Numerous artists also called Athens home >> The most celebrated sculptor/painter/artist of this era was **Phidias**.
- +**Athena** was the patron goddess of the city, whose enormous statue stood high inside the Pantheon.

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- >> **Tertullian's question** comes to mind:
 - “What does **Athens** have to do with **Jerusalem**?”
 - Athens was the home of pagan Greek philosophy, and Jerusalem was home to divine revelation.
 - We might also wonder.

??? > Paul

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- Paul had surely heard about the majestic Athens since he was a boy, but now he was there, waiting on his companions to join him (17:16).
 - >> How would he respond to this grandeur and history and these competing worldviews?
 - ## IF Paul were to be a **Tourist**, there were a lots of attractive historical sites suitable for visitation, photography and video!

3. What Paul Saw & How He Felt (Acts 17:16)

- “While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, his spirit was troubled within him when he saw that the city was full of idols.”
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- ## While Paul surely admired some things about the city, and respected its history, **what struck him most was the idolatry in Athens** (17:16).
- He looked at the city Christianly.
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His spirit was provoked ... v.16

- As Paul looked upon the beauty and grandeur surrounding him, and saw the city wholly given to idolatry, his spirit was stirred with jealousy for God, whom he saw dishonored on every side, and his heart was drawn out in pity for the people of Athens, who, notwithstanding their intellectual culture, were ignorant of the true God. {AA 234.1}

Christian worldview

- ➔ When a person truly becomes a Christian it also transforms how they see everything! Why?
- Because we have a set of beliefs embedded in the storyline of the Bible – creation, fall, redemption, and consummation – that shapes how we view the world.
- >> Christians wear a different set of glasses than non-Christians.
- We enjoy many of the same things in the world, but we see them differently.

Idol Worship & Christian Worldview

- One of things we learn to see with a Christian worldview is that the world is filled with idols.
- We begin to see that underneath sin problems, relational problems, and intellectual problems is a profound worship problem.
- **Luther** said that
 - if you get the first commandment right, the others would follow, because everything follows this fundamental issue of worship.
- Some have said that it was
 - “easier to find a god in Athens than a person.”
 - The marketplace was lined with idols.

Possible Discouragement

- In this great city, where God was not worshiped, Paul was oppressed by a feeling of solitude, and he longed for the sympathy and aid of his fellow laborers... he felt himself to be utterly alone.
- ... he expresses his feelings in the words,
- "Left at Athens alone." (1 Thess. 3:1).
- Obstacles that were apparently insurmountable presented themselves before him, making it seem almost hopeless for him to attempt to reach the hearts of the people. {AA 234.3}
- ➔ >> **Remember that the battle is the Lord's!**

4. Paul with Diverse Groups (17:17-18)

- Luke records Paul evangelizing in **three different places**:
- *the synagogue,
- *the marketplace,
- and then *the Areopagus, where he delivers a formal address.
- The society is filled with great **spiritual diversity**. Some have
- no knowledge of the Bible, or of basic Christian concepts.
- In other parts, there's a general **understanding of the faith**.
- >> We should admire and imitate Paul's flexibility and range in evangelism.

Adaptable Approaches

- Paul adapted to the Jews and pagans, switching approaches from the synagogue to the marketplace, preaching the same gospel in a way that is admirable and exemplary.

EGW on the categories of people that Paul was addressing – v.17

- He "disputed . . . in the **synagogue** with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the **market** daily with them that met with him."
- But **his principal work in Athens** was to bear the tidings of salvation to those who had no intelligent conception of God and of His purpose in behalf of the fallen race.
- The apostle was soon to meet **paganism** in its most subtle, alluring form. {AA 234.4}
- ⇒ **Let us go beyond the 'Christians' of other denominations!**

Paul before the audience:

- ...they, ... saw that he had a store of knowledge even greater than their own.
- His hearers recognized the fact that he was no novice, but was able to meet all classes with convincing arguments in support of the doctrines he taught.
- Thus the apostle stood undaunted, meeting his opposers on their own ground, matching logic with logic, philosophy with philosophy, eloquence with eloquence. {AA 235.2}

5. Paul's Tactful & Compassionate Attitudes

- what's often overlooked is Paul's tone and demeanor in Athens, which displays compassion.
- Just look at how Paul relates to the Athenians. Paul
- “reasoned” with the people (17:17).
- So his feelings didn't lead him to angrily take a sledgehammer to the idols! Instead, in holy love, he engaged, listened, heard, dialogued, and debated.
- That takes gentleness, respect, and compassion. In the speech at the Areopagus, he also demonstrated respect (17:22).

Paul acknowledged their commitment to religion

- Paul addressed the Athenians, acknowledging their commitment to religion, and even mentioned an altar he had encountered.
- The altar was inscribed with the words “To an **Unknown God.**”
- The Greeks in Athens were **so religious that they wanted to ensure they didn't leave any gods out.**

Tactfulness NOT Direct Attack

- Paul's words contain a treasure of knowledge for the church. He was in a position where he might easily have said that which would have **irritated** his proud listeners and brought himself **into difficulty**.
- Had his oration been a **direct attack** upon their gods and the great men of the city, he would have been in danger of meeting the fate of Socrates.
- But with a **tact born of divine love**, he carefully drew their minds away from **heathen deities**, by revealing to them the **true God**, who was to them unknown. {AA 241.1}

6. Application of Cultural Ideas

- Pointing to the noble specimens of manhood about him, with words borrowed from a poet of their own he pictured the infinite God as a Father, whose children they were.
- *"In Him we live, and move, and have our being," he declared; "as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also His offspring."*
- Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device. {AA 238.3}
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Paul was familiar with their culture

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- ➔>> Use languages and Speeches they are familiar with!

Personal and Unique Experiences

- God used the education of Paul and his knowledge of Greek history and thought to prepare him to preach to the Athenians. We don't know how Paul knew about the Epimenides or the backstory on the altar to the unknown god.
- **Your own experiences** are part of how God has shaped you to be a witness for Him. Lean into your background and experiences, God can use them to bring Him glory and salvation to others.

7. More Lessons to Learn from Paul's Preaching in Athens?

- Here are four key lessons from Paul's preaching in Athens.
- **1. Contextualization.** Paul's ability to understand and engage with Athens' cultural and philosophical context is important. He acknowledged their religious devotion and traditions, using their ideas and beliefs to reveal the message of God.
- What beliefs and thoughts of our current culture could we use to show the universal longing for a God who loves and died for them?

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- **2. Respectful Engagement.** Idolatry was a very serious sin... Paul understood the extreme danger of idolatry, but **he didn't begin by condemning their religious practices.**
 - Instead, he engaged with them respectfully, affirming their search for truth. Then he shared the truth.

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- **3. Intellectual Engagement.** Athens was a hub of intellectualism, and Paul engaged with the philosophers in their language.
 - We should understand different cultural perspectives enough to properly express the Gospel without unnecessarily offending people. The Gospel is offensive enough to those in sin. We don't need to help it along.

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- **4. The Centrality and Boldness of the Gospel.** While Paul demonstrated cultural sensitivity and adjusted his language, he did not compromise the core message of the Gospel.
 - He boldly proclaimed the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ, his resurrection, and our need to repent.

8. Let us again examine what Paul did and did not do to draw accurate conclusions

- 1) Acts 17:16- Paul was disturbed by the idolatry.
- Are we disturbed by all the shrines we see everywhere?
- 2) Paul brought a new and different message - (Acts 17:20): They thought Jesus was a new god. They did not view him as starting from where they were.
- 3) Paul took issue with their idolatry - (VV 24, 29): He had compassion on them yet was *disturbed by, and attempted to correct their idolatry.

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- 4) Paul did not fail to call them to repent from their ignorance and idolatry. - (Acts 17:30)
 - 5) Paul introduced another new, strange, and contradictory teaching - (V31) : The resurrection & Judgment.
 - 6) He quoted their poets to introduce his biblical message. What he quoted was probably common language.

9. OBSERVATIONS REGARDING THE RESPONSES

People responded in three different ways

- Ac 17:32-34

- Some mocked what they heard
- Some put off making a decision until later
- Some decided to follow with Paul and believed
- -- Since we have no promise of tomorrow, the only safe course is the last!

God blessed Paul's efforts

- ...His labors in Athens were not wholly in vain. Dionysius, one of the most prominent citizens, and some others, accepted the gospel message and united themselves fully with the believers. {AA 240.2}
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- No eloquence of words, no force of argument, can convert the sinner. The power of God alone can apply the truth to the heart. ...{AA 239.3}

10. Conclusion

- Inspiration has given us this glance into the life of the Athenians, ... that it might be seen how God, through His servant, rebuked idolatry and the sins of a proud, self-sufficient people.
- The words of **the apostle**, and the description of his attitude and surroundings, as traced by the pen of inspiration, were to be handed down to all coming generations, bearing witness of his unshaken confidence, his courage in loneliness and adversity, and the victory he gained for Christianity in the very heart of paganism. {AA 240.3}
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- In reaching out to those OTHER SHEEP of the LORD, may each of us faithfully declare,
 - I Will Go!

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##Additional Information

Backstory to Paul's message you may not have known

- Something about Epimenides you may not have known before, (at least I didn't) is that he is none other than *the* “prophet” that the Athenians believed once saved Athens from a great pestilence. We don't know much about the exact nature of the pestilence, perhaps an ancient COVID 19 or something broke out in Athens in 600 B.C. But we do know that Epimenides is credited for helping them solve the problem with a bit of spiritual advice for them to make sacrifices to the unknown god.
- Read for yourself from Diogenes Laërtius and his book, *“Lives of the Eminent Philosophers”* where he tells the backstory about Epimenides that I have been talking about.
- *“Hence, when the Athenians were attacked by pestilence, and the Pythian priestess bade them purify the city, they sent a ship commanded by Nicias, son of Niceratus, to Crete to ask the help of Epimenides. And he came in the 46th Olympiad,¹ purified their city, and stopped the pestilence in the following way. He took sheep, some black and others white, and brought them to the Areopagus; and there he let them go whither they pleased, instructing those who followed them to mark the spot where each sheep lay down and offer a sacrifice to the local divinity. And thus, it is said, the plague was stayed. Hence even to this day altars may be found in different parts of Athens with no name inscribed upon them, which are memorials of this atonement” (BOOK I p115,117 CHAPTER 10).*