

Acts

Week Six—God Moves in Power through the Gospel (Acts 17)

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We want to share a few updates with you. Great things are happening around here! Last week was a highlight of my life—we had 44 baptisms. Let's celebrate with

- Jon
- Lindsey
- Avrey
- Duane
- Caleb
- Lara
- Landon
- Ashlee
- Aubrey
- Matthew
- Pamela
- Tyler
- Piper
- Heavenly
- Zach
- Lilly
- Nate
- Tamia
- Charlotte
- Luke
- Chad
- Jonathan
- McKeon
- Ron
- Cynthia
- Kaleb
- Ashley
- Daniel
- Karli
- Cody
- Jan
- Charles
- Connor
- Michael
- Sarah
- Eric
- Daniel
- Jake
- Kung
- Tyler
- McKenzie
- Nikkole

- Karen
- Laurel

Second, on October 22 we begin our Thursday night services. Services will begin at 6:30 p.m. We will serve dinner beforehand for anyone interested. We will have childcare for birth through third grade. After the services, the building will remain open for extended interactions and for life groups to meet. We need additional volunteers, especially for children's ministry, guest services, and worship & production.

The Thursday night service could be great for those who need it (every week or just some weeks), those who would prefer it, and those who are willing to open up a seat on Sunday mornings.

We want to connect more people to Jesus, and we believe this will help us do so!

Let's pray!

What do you think is the most effective way to share the Christian faith? When you think about people sharing about Christianity, what comes to your mind? Maybe you think of a preacher, someone like Billy Graham, standing behind a pulpit and sharing the message to a large group of people. Maybe you think about a fundamentalist street corner guy, wearing a sandwich sign and using a bullhorn in a crowd. Maybe you think about a professional athlete who, before his post-game interview, gives all glory to Jesus. I have a friend who is very passionate about sharing the gospel. When he has free time, he goes to a Starbucks, grabs a table, and puts up a sign that says, "I'll buy your coffee for a ten-minute conversation." Out of curiosity, a lot of people sit down and talk with him. In just a few minutes, he tries to learn about their life and point them to the truth of Jesus. There are a lot of different ways that people share the Christian faith. Some of them are effective and faithful, some not so much.

In our passage today, we get to look at the way the apostle Paul, the most effective missionary in the history of the world, communicated the gospel. We'll see how we can take the same principles he used and put them into practice in our lives and our culture as well. For many people who have read and studied the book of Acts, this is their favorite passage in the entire book! Let's look at Acts 17:16-34.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

Let's pause right there. Paul was in a town called Athens and he saw their idols. I've been to Athens several times, and the ruins of their temples still stand. [View the online sermon to see the photos.] You can see the ancient city. That is the Acropolis, the highest point of the city. That hill is filled with temples to Greek gods. The streets were filled with statues, thousands upon thousands of them. One ancient historian wrote, "It is easier to find a god in Athens than a man." Another wrote, "No city in all the world is so full of sacred images." That's what Paul saw.

So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus.

Let's stop right there so we are all on the same page. The Areopagus was a rock hill, only half a mile from the Acropolis, the high place with all the temples. It was the place the leading philosophers from ancient Greece gathered for instruction and teaching. This is the place from which Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle

taught and lectured. This is the place where the smartest men in the ancient world gathered to discuss the most important ideas. And this is where Paul was brought to talk about Jesus.

They said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

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. 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.

“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. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. 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. 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. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ “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. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 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.”

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.” At that, Paul left the Council. 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.

I want us to focus on three specific qualities of Paul’s method of sharing the Christian faith.

A Sensitive Heart

Paul had a sensitive heart. He cared about other people; he cared about their well-being. He cared about society. He cared about the culture. He cared about the city. He didn’t say, “I believe in Jesus, my life is good, all these crazy people can do whatever they want, believe whatever they want; that’s not my concern. I’m just going to live and let live.” No, he cared deeply.

We see this in Acts 17:16: “While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” He saw that the people were worshipping false gods, worshipping statues made with human hands, and he was “greatly distressed.” This same Greek word was used in the ancient medical world to describe a person having a violent seizure. In other words, when he saw people worshipping statues, his heart was not callused; rather, he was stirred within because he cared deeply.

This is just like Jesus. There was a time in Jesus’ ministry when a lot of people were following him because of his teaching and miracles, and Matthew 9:36 says, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” When Jesus saw people, he noticed their need. He didn’t just get on with his day. He didn’t drive by the accident on the side of the road because he was trying to make his next meeting. He had compassion on them. Like

we read in Acts, that was a medical word that meant to have a visceral churning in your gut. It was a physiological reaction to the needs of people.

This leads to an unmistakable and critical point: before we will ever share the gospel effectively, we must care for people deeply. We have to ask God to break our hearts for the things that break his. We have to get our minds and hearts and focus off of exclusive interest in our own lives, and our own families, and our own inner circle, and put our minds, hearts, and focus on the needs of those around us. The need is dire!

How would you respond right now if someone you knew just found out they had a terminal cancer diagnosis? Imagine you just got word. Would it matter whether they were a Democrat or a Republican? Would it matter whether they were rich or poor? Young or old? Black or white? I sure hope not! If you heard that news and you have any kindness in your heart at all, you would be greatly distressed. You would be stopped in your tracks, and you would want to do whatever you possibly could to help. Wouldn't you? Now let me ask you: if we can be moved by a diagnosis that threatens someone's next ten years, shouldn't we be moved by a condition that threatens their eternity? God wants the eternal spiritual need of our neighbors and loved ones to move us deeply. Mission begins with a sensitive heart.

A Strategic Approach

Paul began by being greatly distressed at how far people were from God, and how they were worshipping lifeless idols, and he responded in the most strategic way possible. He didn't get angry, he didn't complain, he didn't sulk. He found the most strategic response he could possibly make. "So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there" (Acts 17:17) What did he do? He went to public places where people gathered—to the synagogue where people came for worship and education, and to the marketplace where people came to shop and connect, and he "reasoned" there. This is a compound word in the Greek—"dia" and "logos"—which sounds like our word "dialogue." When he went to these public forums, he didn't rant on and on, he didn't belligerently shout his personal convictions, he didn't give a rehearsed and canned stump speech. He had informed conversations with the people. He shared ideas, he asked questions, he exposed faulty underlying assumptions, he pointed people to compelling evidence. He used his mind and tried to persuade people to change their beliefs using their minds.

Two specific aspects of his approach were particularly strategic. First, Paul met people on their home turf. Did Paul ask them to come to his house? Did Paul say, "Come to the church building so we can enter into dialogue?" No, he went to where they were. The Jews were meeting in the synagogue, so he went to the synagogue. The Greeks were in the marketplace, so he went to the marketplace. The philosophers were at the Areopagus, so he went to the Areopagus. He didn't expect them to come to him; he purposefully went to them. When we want to impact people for Jesus, we usually need to be the ones who walk across the room and initiate. That's what Paul did.

Second, Paul spoke their language. When Paul went to the synagogue filled with Jews, what did he do to point them to Jesus? He quoted from the Old Testament scriptures and showed how the Old Testament pointed to Jesus, how everything that happened was the direct fulfillment of the promises for which they'd been waiting for centuries. But when he went to the Greek people and to the philosophers, did he quote the Old Testament scriptures? No, because the Greeks and the philosophers didn't know about the scriptures and frankly didn't care about them. Rather than referencing evidence that they did not care about, what did he do? He called attention to their city—to their buildings, their statues, their altars. He said: "I found an altar with the inscription 'to an unknown god.' You already recognize that there is a God out there that you don't know, and you built this altar to make sure you didn't neglect him. Guess what? I know about this God that you don't know about. Let me tell you about him." See how brilliant that is?

Paul didn't say, "Remember what Moses wrote about?" Or, "Remember what Isaiah said?" No, he didn't quote Jewish prophets; he quoted their poets and their philosophers. He quoted Epimenides, a philosopher who lived in Athens and was famed for saving the city from a plague: "For in him we live and move and have our being." He quoted Aratus: "We are his offspring." Aratus was the second most famous poet of the ancient Greek world, after only Homer himself. He quoted from the all-time best seller list, using household names they held in high esteem. He used their heroes' own words to say, "The people you respect the most, the people you love and admire, even they were telling you there is a god who made us, who made us in his image, and he is the one who gives us life." In other words, he was saying, "You already believe the framework of what I'm about to tell you. You already have the black and white sketch, let me fill in the lines with color!" He contextualized without compromising.

While he worked to build bridges and contextualize, he still confronted them in their inconsistencies. He got them nodding along, "Yes, we agree with that. Yes, we agree with that." Then he showed how their beliefs contradicted one another and contradicted logic itself!

- You say you make gods with your hands. The truth is that God made us with his hands.
- You say gods live in the temples you created. The truth is that we live in the temple God created which transcends our physical world.
- You say the gods rely on us to care for them. The truth is we rely on God to care for us.
- You say we are the ones pursuing gods. The truth is God is the one pursuing us.

It's a truly brilliant approach. He met them where they were, spoke their language, quoted their experts, found all the common ground possible, but showed how what they believed was not enough. Some of their beliefs contradicted one another and some of their beliefs contradicted basic logic, so there must be something more!

A Sovereign Story

Then Paul shared with them a sovereign story, pointing them to Jesus through four foundational building blocks, addressing the biggest questions in life. As you'll see, these are the same questions we are still trying to answer today!

Origin—How We Got Here

Everyone wants to know how we got here. Listen to Paul's answer to one of life's biggest questions: "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth...God gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man God made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth" (Acts 17:24-26). Every worldview—religious, atheist, or otherwise—must explain how we got here, why there is something rather than nothing. Why is there a vast, complex, interdependent, beautiful universe teeming with life, all seemingly custom-designed to allow human life to flourish? Paul's answer to how we got here: God made us!

Purpose—Why We're Here

It's not enough to simply know how we got here; we want to know why we're here. Paul answered that question: "God (made the world and made mankind) 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" (Acts 17:27). A car was made to drive. A plane was made to fly. A refrigerator was made to keep things cold. A camera was made to take pictures. You were made for a purpose. Paul said that purpose was to have a relationship with God. He is not far from you, and he wants you to reach out to him. You were not placed here on this earth to go to school, to

have a career, to make money, to invest into hobbies—you are here, the purpose of your life, the reason God made you, is to have a relationship with you.

Identity—What It Means to Be Human

What is it that makes humanity special? What is it that sets us apart from the rest of creation? Paul said, “We are his offspring” (Acts 17:28). God made us in his image. He wants us to be his sons and daughters. God wants a relationship with you, but not in the way that an employer has a relationship with an employee who works for him, or in the way that an owner has a relationship with a pet that he cares for. He wants a relationship with you in a way that a father has with his children. He wants you to be his son or daughter—that is your true and greatest identity.

Destiny—What Happens When We Die

It’s great to know how we got here, why we are here, and who we are. It’s great to know what these 60, 70, or 80 years on this planet are supposed to be about. But what happens when we take our last breath? The Bible says that God has set eternity in the heart of man. Everyone anticipates a type of life after death, a type of life that would make our few decades on this planet just a drop of water in the ocean. We want to know what happens when we die. Paul spoke to that: “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 Jesus from the dead” (Acts 17:31). Paul was saying, “Jesus rose from the dead. One day, everyone will rise from the dead, and everyone who has ever lived will stand before Jesus and Jesus will judge their lives. And most importantly, if you have placed your faith in Jesus, you will be saved and have eternal life, not because of anything good you have done, but because of what Jesus did for you.” Eternal salvation is the free gift of God, and it comes by faith in Christ.

This is the sovereign story! It is the greatest story that has ever been told. People responded three different ways: There were mockers, people who said, “Paul, you are an idiot. You’ve lost your mind.” There were people who were curious, and they said, “We want to learn more; come back and talk to us again.” And there were converts, people who heard this message, responded with faith, and were saved. The same is true when we share the gospel today. Some slam the door and say we are crazy and they aren’t interested. Some are curious and open and want to learn more. And some say yes to Jesus and receive the gift of eternal life. God has not made us responsible for controlling the outcome. He’s simply asked us to faithfully share the good news.

If you are here today and you want to respond to the good news of Jesus, we would love to help you make the most important and best decision of your life.