

Sunday, May 16, 2021

**A Mission that Matters**  
(Reimagining Church Series; Message 27)  
(Where Do We Go from Here?)  
Acts 17:16-34

**Review** (Slide): We're continuing our series on Reimagining Church...

*August - focused on prayer and waiting...*

*September - focused on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit...*

*October - focused on the early church's Rule of Life: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer*

*November - focused on the Church's mission*

*January - focusing on Spirit-empowered leadership*

*February and April - focusing on the marks of a believer: a personal relationship with Jesus, being in community, a wall-break and bridge builder, a balcony person, and a pray-er...*

*May - Where do we go from here...*

**Scripture:**

*<sup>16</sup>While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup>You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean." <sup>21</sup>(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.) <sup>22</sup>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. <sup>23</sup>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. 25And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. 26From 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. 27God 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. 30In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31For 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.”*

*32When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” 33At that, Paul left the Council. 34Some 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.*

## **Message:**

**Acts 1:8 is the thesis statement for the book of Acts and a **mission statement** for the Church. Jesus promised, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”**

The apostle Paul accepted the mission, made it the main thing in his life.

--He knew it was not a suggestion but a command for him: “You will...” “You will...”

--He knew the Holy Spirit empowered all believers (including himself):  
“When the Holy Spirit comes on you...”

--He knew this was for everywhere: “to the ends of the earth” - in your neighborhood, workplace, campus, local merchant and family.

--he knew this command applied to all believers (including himself), not just those with the spiritual gift of evangelism.

**Today, most believers don’t see to get near as **excited** about this “**Great (Co)mission**” as the disciples and believers did in the first century.**

We're actually a bit irritated by the guy who holds the **John 3:16** sign at sporting events (and we wonder how he always gets such great seats) or by the doorknockers from the local Baptist church or the postcards from the new church plant in our neighborhood. Meanwhile, there has not been one single county in the United States where church attendance has grown in the last twenty years.

So when we hear the word "evangelism" in a message or announcement, we get a bit nervous: now what do "they" want me to do or feel guilty about?

Many believers have already concluded they lack the winsome personality, the necessary training and the spiritual gifting to lead someone to Jesus - so they feel they should be exempt from this command of Jesus.

For some it is fear: What if I mess up the presentation? What if they won't even let me talk to them about Jesus? What if they ask a question that I don't know the answer to? What if after I'm all done, they reject Jesus?

Many believers find the Great Commission **intimidating**; many find the way evangelism has been preached about and talked about **irritating**.

In our study of Acts this past year, we've seen both **rewards** and **risks** of evangelizing the Gospel. We've seen thousands of destinies changed for eternity, apostles "*with glad and sincere hearts*" (**Acts 2**), and the church expanded into three continents. We've also seen Stephen stoned to death (**Acts 7**), James beheaded, and Peter seized (**Acts 12**), and Paul and Silas beaten and imprisoned (**Acts 16**) by people who rejected the Gospel.

Today, even though the odds of being killed for evangelizing are relatively low, many are not convinced the rewards outweigh the financial and social risks, or even the possibility of being totally embarrassed.

**Today, Luke invites us to attend the Apostle Paul's School for Effective Evangelism.**

These verses in **Acts 17** take place in Athens (**map**) at the Areopagus (**pic**) – the marketplace of ideas and ideologies, the center of intellectualism and culture in Paul's world, the home to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. E.M. Blaiklock writes, "*Of the world's four supreme tragic artists, Athens produced three. With Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, stands only Shakespeare.*"

At this point in history, Athens has begun to rest on its laurels, but it is still a city dedicated to idol worship. Some have said Athens had more statues of gods and goddesses than all of the other cities of the world combined.

Paul walks into Athens empowered by the Holy Spirit and focused on the Great Co-mission. He models for us what it means to be part of Christ's Great Co-mission...

## **(1) THE **ATTITUDE** LESSON (Acts 17:16)**

**Entering the city, Paul was deeply distressed and saddened (literally, offended) by the **rampant** idolatry he saw everywhere.**

Paul understands they are a spiritually-confused people (like Jesus who saw people like sheep without a shepherd; **Matthew 9:36**) and longs to reach out to them. He doesn't lash out or condemn them; he is moved, as Jesus was, by compassion. Evangelism must radiate from a **compassion**, from an empathy, for those who are lost. Do we really care about them? Do we really care about their eternal destiny? Do we care enough to step out of our comfort zone?

Our world may have set aside the statues of gods and goddesses, but many still worship at the altars of sports, success, narcissism, sexuality, ambition, greed, popularity...

Some believers indignantly condemn pro-abortionists, secular humanists, socialists, homosexuals - and create an "us-verse-them" mentality that drives a deep wedge between us and those who desperately need to hear the message of Jesus.

I am not suggesting we ignore immorality or tolerate injustice; we shouldn't. I'm suggesting instead of attacking them, we "attract" them, i.e., invite them to come to Jesus. It is incredibly hard to attack and attract at the same time; truth is, they're just doing what sinners do.

If we say, "hate the sin but love the sinner," we need to find ways to intentionally extend God's heart of love and compassion to those who desperately need Jesus.

We need to see spiritually-lost people as Paul did - through the **eyes of Jesus** and remember that every single person matters to God.

**Lesson One, and arguably the most important one, is we need an attitude that's more **gentle** than judgmental; more **compassionate** than condemning, more sincere than self-righteous, more bridge-building than wall-breaking.** People can tell the difference; they sense our compassion or our condemnation. Do people know we are Christians by our love, our selflessness, and our compassion? Does a person's lost-ness and eternal destiny really matter to us?

## **(2) THE **APPROACH** LESSON (Acts 17:17)**

**Paul is so distressed by the lost spiritual condition of people in Athens that he **intentionally** goes to where the non-believers are hanging out to be with them.** Paul deliberately engages the world looking for opportunities to talk to people about Jesus; he intentionally seeks and engages the lost.

Most of us interact with unbelievers at work, school, and in our neighborhood and marketplaces. We interact with co-workers, fellow students, merchants and professional people. But few believers venture into their day focused and intent on sharing the Good News. Few believers engage the world with their Gospel antenna raised so opportunities for spiritual conversations with non-believers are often overlooked and missed.

**Some years ago, South Korea initiated the “One, One, One” prayer movement.** Tens of thousands of people came to Christ. It was rather simple; I invite you to try it:

Just select a (1) person in your sphere of influence you believe God is calling you to build a relationship with to share your faith and commit to pray for that person for one minute everyday at 1 p.m. You can set your phone alarm to go off everyday at 1; and when it does, pray for that person to come to know Jesus and for God to use you in the process. If someone hears your phone go off, explain to them what you’re doing (Someone asked if it was okay to pray for two people at two o’clock? Yes, it is!).

**(or) Daily ask God to use you to **intervene** in another’s **eternal** destiny.** Jesus’ disciples and followers understood their mission was to disciple more followers for Jesus and build His Church.

**Lesson Two: When we engage Christ’s mission prayerfully** (as Paul and the early church modeled), **God will give us opportunities** to “reason” (i.e., converse) spiritually with others.

### **(3) THE **AUTHENTICITY** LESSON (Acts 17:18-21)**

**Paul is mixing it up **intellectually** with these Greek philosophers.**

Even though it has been almost 2000 years, the beliefs of people in Paul’s day are remarkably similar to people’s beliefs today. The culture in Athens parallels the culture of our world.

The Epicureans believed the gods and the world were at a considerable distance from each other and had little communication or connection, so they were free to pursue their own personal pleasure and agenda. And they did. They believed it was “live and then die.” Death was the end of everything; there was no ultimate accountability. People still live like that.

The Stoics believed their god was within them and not only could be discovered, “he” could be controlled – so they made their god into anything they wanted him to be. They could define their own truth, right and wrong. People still think the world should revolve around them and their agenda.

And most Athenians loved to talk endlessly about theories, ideas and opportunities without actually having to commit to do anything.

The philosophers invited Paul to the Areopagus - the center for the intellectual elite. The invitation was not as friendly or cordial as it may sound. In fact, it contained an implied threat. Paul was identified as disregarding the State's gods and promoting foreign gods: Jesus and Anastasis (The Greek for resurrection is *anastasis*. It sounded to the Greeks like another god. The word is in the feminine, so another goddess. Literally, Jesus and his lady friend).

Paul was also "charged" with "word-scattering" ("babbling"; v. 18). The accusation is full of contempt: a word-scatterer is a person with lots of bold contentious talk about nothing of substance. An insult in the philosophy community.

These charges were actually similar to the charges against the Athenian, Socrates - one of the greatest philosophers of all time. He was tried, convicted and poisoned to death.

Paul, however, as a follower of Jesus, in spite of the possible consequences (his life), relished this opportunity to talk about His Jesus! It was not only how God wired him; it was not only how he had been trained; it was the **essence** of the **mission** he had signed on to. Paul loved the confrontation of a face-to-face debate, but even more, he loved to talk about Jesus.

Paul is witnessing with authenticity, integrity, and passion. **Authenticity** and **integrity** are two necessary ingredients in our sharing the Gospel.

**God has wired us uniquely; as believers we are to live differently, talk differently, and witness differently** - not only different from the world, but even differently from one another. We each need to discover our authentic approach, develop it, and deploy it with integrity.

Some people can prayer earnestly, some can debate, some can pass out tracts, some can go door to door, some can invite neighbors to a back-yard bonfire or BBQ, some can invite people to a worship service, some can organize a small group for seekers; some like to use the *Four Spiritual Laws*, others prefer *Evangelism Explosion* or the *Roman Road*; some can give their testimony. Not everyone can do everything, but everyone can do something!

Mark Middelberg notes numerous evangelism styles in his book, *Contagious Christian*:

- In addition to Paul's **intellectual** discussion (here in **Acts 17**), there is the **testimonial** approach found in **Acts 19** where Christians are sharing how Christ changed their life!
- In **Acts 10**, Cornelius illustrates the **invitational** approach as he invites others to come and hear someone else share the Gospel.
- Dorcas uses a **service** approach in **Acts 9**. In her serving, she tells people she is doing this because of and for Jesus.

--Philip illustrates an **interpersonal** approach - where people build meaningful relationships with others to express Christ' love and help them along their spiritual journey - with the Ethiopian Eunuch in **Acts 8**.

--Here Paul uses a more **confrontational** approach – it fits in the context of the Areopagus. Paul says, “*In the past God overlooked such ignorance (like you have) and now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice...*” (**Acts 17:18**).

My *Evangelism Explosion* trainer quoted **Hebrews 9:27** on occasion when meeting with someone: “[Every] *man is destined to die once, and after that the judgment!* (so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many)” (Much to my amazement, it sometimes worked; but in our current culture, my experience suggests the confrontational approach seldom works well).

The Greeks had no concept of life after death, no concept of having to give an account to their creator, no concept of serving one sovereign God. This was all new. But “new” among the Athenians was questionable and untrustworthy; it was the “old” that was venerated and respected.

Some people are comfortable with multiple styles. What is your approach?  
**Lesson three: Be authentic! “Be Yourself.” Share your faith as God has wired you to share it and as the Spirit leads you.**

#### **(4) THE ARTICULATION LESSON (Acts 17:22-23)**

**Talk gospel! Be the gospel. People need to hear the Good News. People need to see the Good News in us. Paul writes in Romans 10:14 (NLT) -** “*And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them?*”

So Paul tells them, but he doesn't deliver a canned (memorized) presentation, he **tailors** his **response** to his listeners; i.e., he makes it personal and relevant. When Paul testified to the Jews, he went back to the Old Testament. But since these people aren't in a Jewish synagogue but in the Greek Areopagus; Paul starts with something they have in common.

Paul says, “*I found an altar with this inscription: To an Unknown God. What you worship as unknown I am going to proclaim to you*” (**17:23**).

Years before, a large epidemic broke out in Athens. The city leaders, not knowing how to end it, had a bright idea: they released lambs into the city. They said, “Whichever gods they settled by, those were the gods they would sacrifice to.” (Athenians are philosophers and pragmatists!)

The problem was the lambs didn't cooperate (surprise, surprise!); they laid down in areas where there were no altars. So the leaders figured they should build altars there and make sacrifices - even if they didn't know to whom they

were sacrificing.

Paul is observant; a quick study; he embraces the context; he relates the Gospel to their specific needs. He **listens** and earns the **right** to speak the Gospel . . . and then he does.

Ron Johnson wrote a great little book on evangelism entitled, "*How will they Hear if We don't Listen.*" Great title. Foundational truth. We need to know people before we can effectively relate the Gospel (In high school, I did beach evangelism using "Four Spiritual Laws;" It (I) was not very effective).

Ironically, **listening** is probably the most important skill in effective evangelism. Listening builds bridges. Listening helps us determine how spiritually open they are. Listening helps us find common ground, focus on and build the relationship and avoid being judgmental. Listening earns us the right to share our testimony and offer our perspective. Listening helps us determine the proper approach. Listening helps determine what aspect of the Gospel we may need to focus on as we share it.

**Lesson Four: Witnessing begins with inquiry** - showing interest, asking appropriate questions... and then listening carefully. We may not want to ask, "*Are you interested in knowing how a disgusting sinner like you can escape the eternal punishment and fire of hell?*" but maybe ask, "*Did you do anything special last weekend or...doing anything special this coming weekend?*"

## **(5) THE **APOLOGETICS** LESSON (Acts 17:24-31)**

**In these eight verses, Paul's brilliantly presents evidence about (the real) God. Peter probably best articulates this in 1 Peter 3:15 - "*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.*"**

Paul doesn't just tell them to believe, he shares his testimony and offers them **reasons** to **believe**. Some non-believers may have a question holding them back from accepting Jesus. You don't need to know the answer; you just need to assist them in addressing it - offer to study and answer it together...

**Meanwhile, we should always be **learning** more about and deepening our faith so we can provide people reasons for our hope.** Pick up and read a book like *Mere Christianity* (C.S. Lewis); *Christianity 101* (Gilbert Bilezikian), *Know what You Believe* (Paul Little), or better yet, the Bible!

**The fifth lesson is Peter's challenge.** Always be **prepared**. Always be ready for God to use you. It is amazing how many people don't know what they believe and have never seized the opportunities God gives to share his Good News!!



## **(6) THE ASSIMILATION LESSON (Acts 17:32-34)**

When Paul was finished - some sneered; some were interested; some believed. Results **matter**. Simply informing people about Jesus changes **nothing**!

The sixth lesson is that God's mission is about **transforming** lives, **assimilating** new believers into God's family, and to changing people's **eternal destiny**. We might introduce them to Jesus, someone else may hear their commitment; we may witness their baptism, another may disciple them.

But as Christ's Church, as Christ's disciples, we can never lose sight of Christ's **mission** - to form non-believers far from God into mature, fully devoted, discipling disciples of Jesus Christ. Our life is not about **us** - not even a little - it's about **Jesus**! The Main Thing is to keep the Main Thing the Main Thing!

**Are we willing to embrace Christ's Commission, offer ourselves fully to Christ's mission to transform lives and change people's eternal destiny? There is no higher calling.** With the help of the Holy Spirit, if we offer ourselves to God to transform lives, he will use us! *"Is there any reason why today can't be the day you receive Jesus Christ as the forgiver of your sins and the leader of your life?"*

## **(7) THE ACTION LESSON**

Disobedient lives bring God's judgment; unspoken testimonies have no impact; unprayed prayers are not answered; the best intentions get **nothing** done.

The resurrection of Jesus has changed everything. Believers are transformed from meek to bold; from self-serving to self-sacrificing; from running from the heat to running into the fire. The world has been offered hope, life-saving grace, a God-honoring mission, and an eternal destination.

**We are not word-scatterers; we are Christ's witnesses; we are on mission not only to make an impact, but to make an eternal difference; and the main thing is to keep Christ's Mission the main thing! Don't settle for anything less.**

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