

Gospel Clarity: A Powerful Remedy for a World Sized Problem
Acts 17:16-32

*“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is **the power of God** for salvation to everyone who believes.”*
Romans 1:16

Introduction: I was given a sweet and unexpected gift this week that came from a man I’ve never met but will be my brother and friend into eternity. Tomorrow I have the privilege to speak at the Memorial service for Eb Schodensack, the father of Hannah Spencer. As the family was going through the many notes Eb had left behind (as an Engineer he liked to write things out), he left details of how he came to know Christ as his Lord and Savior, which is an amazing gift to leave a family. After being married for 6 years and having two kids, he had a series of loss and disappointment, along with trials and challenges in raising kids. He had left Boeing for a job at Rocketdyne, which put him on the same shift as a man named Floyd. Floyd stood out because he did NOT drink, swear, or share exploits like other employees. Eb had a ton of questions about God and creation, and Floyd helped answer those questions over the shifts together, giving books and pamphlets to read along the way. On May 7, 1966, Eb, a good and moral man who needed salvation, gave his life to Christ. In his own words, life entirely changed! He stopped smoking and drinking, loved his wife Jerri more than ever, desired to teach his children at home, began to serve and use his gifts in the church, and through many trials and tribulations, desired to see his children, extended family, and neighbors come to know Christ. *“When you have, when you possess something other people need very desperately, you must share it with others. It is supernatural! It isn’t just motivation, it is transformation. Please come!”*

What a gift! What a testimony. As we approach this New Year, we want to evaluate ourselves in light of clear Biblical truth and direct our lives in submission to God’s ultimate authority. Last week we looked at how we want to have **Scripture saturated lives**, which will help us at a level of *motivation and clarity*. Scripture intake is not something to check off a list as a duty, but something to take in like a newborn baby takes in its mothers milk (1 Pet. 2:1-2). In this we mix **desire and discipline, personal drive with total dependency, and an expectation that there WILL be God given results**. One of my concerns for our church is that we have ANY who would function as *outsiders*, who listen enough to know lingo and adopt the culture, but who have no *personal, yielded, joyful* relationship with God in Christ. Scripture intake is not only the way to *facilitate growth*, it is also a *temperature gauge* for our soul.

Now we take one more step of evaluation in terms of our belief in the **power of Scripture through the message of the gospel**. In a desire to teach and motivate people to share the gospel, the church has often tried to boil down the gospel to a simple presentation of four parts, or give a script that can be memorized, or a prayer to be repeated. These efforts are admirable, but often breed a weak and misunderstood understanding of the power of the gospel itself. I personally have talked to too many people who think they are saved because they repeated a prayer or agreed to something they did not personally understand (“do you want to be saved? Just say this_____”). No transformation, no life change, no repentance, and no transfer of master or king, people are left with an experience in the past that has no power to help in the present.

It may surprise you that I personally do not have a script for presenting the gospel to people, but have a set of principles and truth that is laid out in Scripture. In fact, the **New Testament gives no simplistic or repeatable FORMULA for the presentation of the gospel**. Let me try to illustrate this by two passages that **Luke** gave us in Luke and Acts, that start with the same question, illicit different responses, and end with entirely different results. The **first** is found in Acts 16:30, where the Philippians jailer, after

contemplating suicide after an earthquake let the prisoners out, asked Paul, “*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*”, to which Paul offered simply, “**Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.**” **And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.**” Simple, straightforward, and clear. Believing is the foundation of salvation, and the object of Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation (Acts 4:12). Does this mean that “Believe in the Lord Jesus” is the formula? By no means. Here’s why:

In **Luke 18:8**, a young, rich ruler came to Jesus with a similar question for Jesus: “*Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” What is the expected answer? “Just believe in me”. But Jesus did NOT answer this man this way. Instead he first directed him to the Law, which the young man foolishly boasted that he had kept them all. Yikes! This man clearly did not understand that he had broken the Law, was a sinner in need of salvation, and must leave his current life in order to follow Jesus. *What DID Jesus tell him? “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”* Was this some form of works based righteousness? No, Jesus was sad since the man had come to GET something from Jesus but did not want to yield TO Him. He wanted to keep self-autonomy and add Jesus and eternal life, but did not want to give up self-mastery. So the man left disappointed, unchanged, and by our standards, Jesus proved not to be a great evangelist!

So if there is not formula or script, what DO we need to present and believe about the gospel. What is the power of the gospel? How do we make sure we know it well enough to be able to speak about it with the skeptic and seeker alike, with a stranger and our best friend since childhood? This is where I believe **Acts 17 is supremely helpful**. Acts 17 is the narrative that illustrates what Paul said in **Romans 1:16**: “*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’*”

The Power of the Gospel on Display

Last week we took a look at the first part of Acts 17, where Paul and Silas came into Thessalonica and entered the synagogue there to proclaim the gospel to the Jews there. He did this over several weeks, **reasoning** or entering into dialogue about the Old Testament Scripture with the goal to show and prove **two indelible truths: 1) The long awaited Messiah had to both SUFFER (DIE) and RISE AGAIN**, which was seen in Isaiah 53, Psalm 16, 22, and **2) That Jesus of Nazareth, the One who was crucified years earlier, was that Messiah**. Because the Jews already believed in one God and the Scriptures, Paul did not have to prove these things. It is also clear that he made clear that they had to adopt this Jesus as their King as well as Messiah (which in a Jewish mind would have been the same thing), and turn from Judaism to follow Jesus Christ. Note that the response was both **transformation for some and antagonism for others**. The Jews chased Paul out of Thessalonica AND out of Berea, small town 50 miles away off the Egnatian Way. The gospel is either received, rejected, or ignored, but even those that ignore it cannot stay passive forever.

Those that received the gospel positively did so wholeheartedly, not only being forgiven of sin and turning from it, but turning TO Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Thessalonica started more skeptical, with Berea being more **noble**, as they searched the Scriptures to see if what Paul said matched up with the Old Testament. Both places saw “not a few” converts and followers, with Thessalonica becoming one of the dearest churches for Paul, one that was faithful and true to Christ. But those who rejected the gospel also rejected Paul, so he was forced to leave Berea as well, so Paul set off for the influential city of **Athens** where he was told to stay and wait for his own safety. *But Paul could never wait long....*

What we'll see are principles by which Paul approached evangelism and disciple making in a new context, how that place mirrors our own, and what is essential to present a fully orbbed gospel that is powerful to save and transform.

- **“Contextualizing” the gospel**

Among the many mission's conversations over the past decade, one that stands out and is often polarizing is this issue of *contextualization*. The conversation is valid, since it centers around the reality that different cultures, countries, and even continents have different ways of hearing, different traditions, and different values than our own. If you've ever tried to explain something in another country using idioms and figures of speech that are common to us but foreign to other ears, the issue of contextualization is imperative. The more I can understand someone's culture, language, and background, the more clarity I can bring a message. This is logical, reasonable, and good.

However, the idea of contextualization takes a *false* turn when it marches down a path of changing the *message* to fit the culture, rather than clarifying language. If in the name of helping someone understand the gospel we leave out essential components or lessen the requirements OF the gospel, the practice is harmful, not helpful. What Paul shows us in Acts 17 in Athens is a principled way of understanding the thinking of someone, infusing Biblical truth into it without compromise.

Acts 17:16-23a *“Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was **provoked** within him as he **saw** that the city was **full of idols**. 17 So he **reasoned** in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. 18 Some of the **Epicurean and Stoic philosophers** also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this **babbling** wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. 19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.” So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I **perceive** that in every way you are very religious.*

*23 For as I passed along and **observed** the objects of your worship,*

- **Paul started with observation, perceiving, and studying the culture he was placed into** – Notice a bit of a change of operation, as Paul still went into the synagogue and taught the Jews, but he had time to look around and seek to understand the makeup of a city given over to **idols**, literal graven images, and a multiplicity of gods.
- **He understood and interacted with TWO main philosophies of life:** The Epicureans and Stoics

Epicurean philosophy – Epicurus founded the school in Athens in 300 B.C. This philosophy was not anti-pleasure, but the chief end of life was the **avoidance of pain**. Gods existed but did not involve themselves in human affairs or have any authority. The thought of punishment in a life beyond the grave was abhorrent to them. Man had ultimate free will, and the universe was governed by atoms moving in a straight line (their version of “modern” science), but sometimes for no cause whatsoever swerve just a little bit, which explained why for no cause whatever, man could move in opposition to the law of mechanics. Hence, nature is to a limited extent under human control. Death meant returning to the dust and out of existence.

Stoic philosophy – Founded by Zeno (342-270 B.C), this was a philosophy of **self-mastery, striving for rigorous virtue**. The idea was to reach a place of indifference to pleasure or pain. Most men are vicious, most men are foolish, only a few are wise – so only a few can reach a level of understanding and mastery.

Both of these philosophies majored on **self autonomy and self-authority**, rejected the idea of the resurrection of the dead, and believed that there are many gods, but rejected the fact that there could be one God. This was the place that Paul gave one of his most compelling, full, and powerful gospel sermons as he was welcomed up the Areopagus, or Mars Hill, to interact with the philosophies of the day. *Do these philosophies sound familiar? They should. They are really no different than the religious beliefs of our day.*

Natasha Crain, in her recent book *“Faithfully Different”*, insightfully summarized modern Western philosophy this way: *“Feelings are the ultimate guide, happiness is the ultimate goal, judging is the ultimate sin, and God is the ultimate guess.”*

We are the ULTIMATE determiner of right and wrong, MY feelings trump what you may believe is true, anything in the way of my happiness must be removed (even violently), and since truth is unknowable or not absolute, I can ultimately do whatever I want. We are in charge. All religions are valid because they are all equal, except if you have the audacity to say one is actually true. The summary of Western Philosophy is **man has ultimate authority, not God**. People are ok if you believe a ‘god’ exists, but He better not demand anything or expect anything. So morality is a cultural construct that is ever shifting based on the mob (what was acceptable yesterday may not be acceptable today), and standing firm in convictions is met with skepticism, fear, and anger. **This is why HOW Paul presented the gospel is so instructive to us, since we find ourselves in a similar makeup as the city of Athens 2000 years ago.**

- **Establishing the Existence and Nature of God**

How did Paul broach this divide? He did not appeal to the OT Scriptures directly as he did in the synagogue, since the Greek philosophers would not have believed them. What he DID do was begin to explain the nature and existence of God in a way that was both **compelling and dissonant** to the ones he interacted with, since they **wanted to hear more AND thought he was a “BABBLER”**, which means a seed picker, one who cherry picks ideas without connection or depths. But also notice that though Paul **reasoned through dialogue, he did not argue**. He started with an observation of their own religion, pointing out the **altar to the “UNKNOWN GOD”**, set up in case they had missed some deity and incurred unnecessary angst for this slight. Then he spent his time **proclaiming what was true to inform their ignorance**:

Acts 17:23b-28 *“I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸for*

“ ‘In him we live and move and have our being’;

as even some of your own poets have said,

“For we are indeed his offspring.”

What did this group need to know to understand the gospel? He **presupposed** the existence of God, and gave **5 principle truths of who He is**:

1. **God is Creator (24a)** – The Epicureans and Stoics were supernaturalists, so Paul maximized that belief, but boldly contradicted what they believed about beginning of the world. There is an ontological argument to be made for the existence of God (Heb. 3:4 – every house has a builder – if there is a Creation, there must be a Creator), but believing that God created the world with a word is ultimately an issue of faith (Heb. 11:3). What Paul did was presented the truth of Scripture so that they could either respond in faith or in fleshly rebellion.
2. **God is Lord of Heaven and earth (24b)** – Since God CREATED, He is SUPREME over his creation (Col. 1:18). The reason why people want to believe in some form of *evolutionary theory* is the fact that they are accountable to NO ONE if there is no supreme deity over them. Paul established that God is not a distant deity but one that is active over heaven and earth.
3. **God is the giver of all things (25)** – God is not only creator but **sustainer of all things**, the One who gave breath for life and continues to give us the ability to breathe today.
4. **God determines all things (26)** – Man is NOT the ultimate determiner of his own fate and future, but God determines the boundaries and times that man will live on the earth.
5. **God reveals Himself to mankind (27)** – This powerful, supreme, sustaining, and determining God makes Himself known, allowing mankind to seek and find Him. In other words, He WANTS to be known, and DESIRES to have man come to Him. With wise and shrewd reasoning, Paul confirmed that this was seen by Athenians themselves, quoting Epimenides of Crete and a poem by Aratus, who hailed from Paul’s home region of Cilicia.

Note that Paul built a Biblical case without quoting Scripture, but each point he made could easily be backed up by both OT and NT passages. Before someone can come to a saving knowledge of their sin, they must know WHO they have sinned against, and WHO we are being reconciled to. In a current culture of confusion over who God is (even though most would SAY they believe in God), the best place to start in evangelism is established who God truly is.

- **Solidifying the Expectation of Humanity**

Once the nature of God is established, Paul moved to the next logical and Biblical reality: *since we are the “created”, we are under His authority and thus He has expectations of us.*

1. **Mankind is responsible to think rightly about God (29)** - Mankind rejects God by replacing Him with idols, worshipping the creation rather than the creator. Our problem is not an issue of a lack of information, our problem is **REBELLION against the information we already know.**

Romans 1:19-20 – *“For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, **have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.***

2. **Mankind has offended a holy God and must REPENT (30)** – Here is the point that so many who *contextualize* bog down. They want to talk about God’s love and the advantages of coming to God in Christ without addressing the issue of repentance. But this is what God demands for people who come to Him by faith. **Repentance** is not merely being forgiven of sin, but a complete change of directions, from self-authority, worldly philosophy, and sinful indulgence to following Christ with our whole being. In the midst of the most **intellectual group that the world could offer** and a **hostile audience**, Paul did not back down on the essential message of the gospel: ***we have offended a HOLY God, and WE must repent or remain under His wrath and judgment.***
3. **Mankind must know that JUDGEMENT is coming against the unrighteous (31)** – Judgment is COMING, and God is righteous and justified to punish evil and sin.
4. **Mankind can have assurance through the RESURRECTION of an appointed man (32)** – This paved the way to offer the hope of Christ, and Jesus is not just a loving Savior, He is powerful since He was resurrected from the dead, displaying power over death (and sin), and thus giving assurance to all.

Paul did not back down from giving the truth. Though his spirit was **provoked** and angry at the idolatry of Athens (17:16), he approached the people of Athens with grace, logic, and clarity. This is the epitome of love. Remember, the gospel is offensive. We do our best NOT to be offensive with our language or approach (no finger wagging or angry diatribes), but in the end, if we give a complete gospel, it will be an affront to our sin nature and current philosophies.

The Conflict That the Gospel Brings

The power of the gospel is seen in the fact that in Athens, just like Thessalonica and Berea, there were those who **believed and followed**, and they are named: **Dionysius and Damaris**, along with others. This is the hope that we have each day, that as we present Christ from Scripture, God will glorify Himself by saving all that He has called.

But remember as well that there was adverse reactions as well, some flaccid and others overt. Some wanted to hear more, while others outright mocked.

Church, please remember that following Christ fully WILL put us at odds with culture, and though we do not go out of our way to do so, we will look foolish, unlearned, narrow minded, unintelligent, weak, and out of step to many. We love people, serve our communities, and hopefully shine brightly, but what people truly need is to come to grips with their Creator, knowing that they will have to answer to Him now or in the future, one with hope of restoration and reconciliation, the other under the heavy hand of judgment.

So let’s commit to talking to people about Who God is where hope is found, in the Person and finished work of Christ! May God give us wisdom, clarity, and passion to see “not a few” be persuaded to follow Christ this year.