

Witnessing to a Godless Culture

Acts 17:16-34

Apologetics Class – 15MAR13

INTRODUCTION:

- We face two big problems when we witness to people, no matter the context
 - o Postmodernism (no absolutes whatsoever).
 - No standards, morality, God, accountability, etc.
 - o Biblical illiteracy (article from last class)
- Christian simply must be prepared to start from the beginning when we evangelize, if necessary
 - o We're not at all on the same page with secularists in this day and age
 - o Excerpt from Carson's lecture (9 mins)¹

BACKGROUND:²

- Pluralism is flourishing
- Paul is not on safe ground
- Rome encouraged pluralism and Emperor worship³
 - o Policy was to mix gods of various religions and destroy cultural gods and mesh them all together
 - o Emperor worship – this made the Christians and Jews particularly troublesome to Romans
- Exposed to diversity of world
 - o All opinions are equal
 - o All religions lead to God
 - o No definitive revelation or standard
 - o Subjectivism to the nth degree
- Massive Biblical illiteracy
 - o Teaching in marketplace – far away from Christianity or Judaism!
 - o Paul still has to preach Christ and the resurrection to them (Acts 17:18)
 - o Moses = Charlton Heston
 - o Best known verse = Judge not! (Mt 7:1)
 - Doesn't mean "don't be morally indifferent."
 - o What does he do about this?
- We seek to erase false ideas from people's minds, and replace it with the Gospel
 - o Biblical philosophy of history is essential

¹ D.A. Carson, "Postmodernism and Biblical Illiteracy," Oct 18-19, 1997, High Park Baptist Church, Toronto. 59:30 – 68:50. <http://andynaselli.com/d-a-carson-mp3s>.

² I used insights throughout this paper from a lecture by D.A. Carson, "Apostolic Evangelism of Biblical Illiterates," Oct 18-19, 1997, High Park Baptist Church, Toronto. <http://andynaselli.com/d-a-carson-mp3s>.

³ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, combined ed. (Peabody, MS: Prince, 2007), 14-15.

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¹⁶ Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.

- Depressed and sad
- Athens' magnificence was worthless from God's point of view

¹⁷ Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him.

- Started with people who he knew and had common ground with
- Also went out to people who had no knowledge of God
- *Marketplace*. Background on markets
- Where is the "marketplace" today?
 - o We must seek out opportunities
 - o EX: Carson's subway story, businessmen's lunches, email, blogging, door to door, etc.
 - o We're only limited by our own imaginations

¹⁸ Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is? ²⁰ For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean. ²¹ (For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.)

PAUL'S SERMON!

- Paul didn't start with the Gospel of Christ
 - o They wouldn't have understood
 - o They didn't speak the language
 - o Lordship Salvation example - "We need to made a part of His righteousness"
 - What in the world does this even mean?!
- Paul started from the very beginning

²² Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.

- Everybody is religious.
- There is an inherent need to worship *something*!

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- Paul sought common ground, or a point to start a conversation – then used it

²³ For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.

- Paul looked about and *knew* they were lost
 - o Religious and running scared (“unknown god”)
- No equivocation or coddling. The plain truth is laid bare
- There is no neutrality or middle ground
- There is no “mere Christianity” type of thinking
- Paul unapologetically preaches the truth to a confused, and possibly hostile, people
- Nobody is neutral. Everybody has presuppositions
 - o They had multiple gods
 - o We have the one true God
- Basic argument: *“You’re worshipping something you don’t even know! There is one God, you do know Him, and let me tell you about Him . . .”*

²⁴ God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;

- **Paul has ruled out pantheism!**
 - o God created everything and is Lord over everything
 - o If we are creatures . . . we must owe God something!
 - o Human accountability is grounded in our status as creatures

²⁵ Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;

- God needs nothing from mankind
- He made mankind!
- He gives mankind everything!
- God is completely sovereign
 - o He is not going to be domesticated, like a housecat
 - o He doesn’t depend on us for shelter (temple), food or anything
 - o He isn’t waiting for us to serve Him so He can purr contentedly.
 - o He is the one who gives *us* everything! We need Him!

²⁶ And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;

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- He continues describing God:
 - He is Creator of the human race. Everybody has equal value in His eyes
 - *Having determined*. He is in control of everything. Active control (“determined”), not passive.
 - “He spake of the providence of God, which doth show forth itself in the whole government of the world. For when he saith, that God appointeth the times ordained before, and the bounds of men’s habitations, his meaning is, that *this world is governed by his hand and counsel, and that men’s affairs fall not out by chance, as profane men dream.*”⁴
 - *Allotted periods*. Length of life, rise and fall of nations, fate of empires⁵
 - *Boundaries*. Place we live is up to God

²⁷ That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:

- *That they should seek God.*
 - He has made Himself known in every single way!
 - Men are condemned for not seeking after Him when so much may be known about Him (**Rom 1:20** – “without excuse”)
 - “For God hath not darkly shadowed his glory in the creation of the world, but he hath everywhere engraven such manifest marks, that even blind men may know them by groping. Whence we gather that men are not only blind but blockish, when, being helped by such excellent testimonies, they profit nothing.”⁶
- Immanence of God verses
 - He is everywhere and cannot be escaped
- **Paul has ruled out deism!**
 - God didn’t set the world spinning on it’s axis and step back to recline in an easy chair.
 - He determines the fate of nations!
 - He determines where people live and how they die!
 - He bestows grace on everybody so all might seek Him!

²⁸ for in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*, vol.2, 17:26. Emphasis mine.

⁵ Albert Barnes, “Acts,” *Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 263.

⁶ Calvin, *Acts*, 17:27.

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- For *“In him we live and move and have our being;*
 - o Quote from Cretean poem from 600 B.C.⁷
 - o Zeus’ son honoring his father
 - They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one –
 - The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies!
 - But thou art not dead; thou livest and abidest forever,
 - *For in thee we live and move and have our being*
- For *we are indeed his offspring*
 - o Quite from another poem about Zeus from ca. 315-240 B.C.
 - o *“It is with Zeus that every one of us in every way has to do, for we are also his offspring.”*
- Even the way they worship their false gods betrays knowledge of the True God!
 - o Paul employed an example from popular culture to emphasize their innate knowledge of God
 - o *“It is one instance among thousands where an acquaintance with profane learning may be of use to a minister of the Gospel.”*⁸
 - o *“For because men have naturally some perseverance of God, they draw true principles from that fountain. And though so soon as they begin to think upon God, they vanish away in wicked inventions, and so pure seed doth degenerate into corruptions; yet the first general knowledge of God doth nevertheless remain still in them.”*⁹
- Use everyday, commonplace things to illustrate Scriptural truth!
 - o Make the connections when you can!

²⁹ 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.

- Paul attacks idolatry head on now and shifts to the present
- Observe the progression
 - o Identified who God was
 - o How God has shown Himself
 - o Demonstrated their own popular writers acknowledged His existence implicitly
 - o Moves to the present and draws implications
- *Being then.* Paul has proven his case and moves on to the inevitable conclusion
- *God’s offspring.* If we are really the product of such a powerful and mighty God, we are accountable to Him – like a son to a father.
- *We ought not to think.* It would be silly to suppose . . .

⁷ Richard Longenecker, “Acts,” vol. 9, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 476. Information from both quotations are from Longenecker.

⁸ Barnes, “Acts,” 264.

⁹ Calvin, *Acts*, 17:28.

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- God isn't of this world, like gold, silver or stone
- He isn't a fiction of our imaginations (Rom 1:23)
- **Isa 40:18-23**

³⁰ **And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent:**

- God had allowed the Gentiles to go their own way for several thousand years (Rom 16:25; Eph 3:9) without revelation
 - Now, after Christ, the Gospel was open to them completely
 - Repent!
- *Times of ignorance.* The period when they hated God and went their own way.¹⁰ God overlooked rebellion and sent Christ to die for the sins of the world anyway! God's grace is truly amazing
 - "We must principally note to what end he saith this; to wit, that the ignorance of former times may not hinder us from obeying God without delay when he speaketh."¹¹
- *Why did God wait so long to give direct revelation to the Gentiles?*¹²
 - The Gentiles hadn't had direct revelation from God, un-mediated through the Israelites, since before the Patriarchs (Gen 12; Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, etc.)
 - Common attack of unsaved people is to demand God's ways make sense to them. They insist that God must explain Himself fully and completely to them
 - Never be ashamed to point out the Creature – Creator relationship.
 - We will not ever understand *all* His ways; God has stated He has kept secrets from us (Deut 29:29).
 - "Though God has kept much of his counsel secret, yet there is enough revealed to satisfy and save us. *He has kept back nothing that is profitable for us, but that only which it is good for us to be ignorant of.*"¹³
 - This doesn't excuse us for not knowing what He *has* given us – the Bible!
 - Nobody will ever be argued into the kingdom. The Holy Spirit will do it's work in the hearts of men
 - Apologetics is, in a sense, little more than practical theology for evangelism

¹⁰ Barnes, "Acts," 264-265. "Paul here refers to the times preceding the Gospel."

¹¹ Calvin, *Acts*, 17:30

¹² See my excursus on the Gentiles' relationship to Israel in the OT after these notes

¹³ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Deut 29:29.

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- *Repent!*
 - It is man's *duty* to repent
 - It *can* be done
 - It is *binding* on everybody
 - It *must* be done, or your soul is lost
 - It is the *duty* of Christians to get this message out
 - God is real, personal and interested – and holds his creatures accountable! So different from the pantheistic culture he preached in

³¹ Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

- Paul has come full circle. Look at the progression:
 - From pantheism – deism – personal God – sin – Jesus Christ
- We must establish framework for the Gospel before we preach the Gospel

³² And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter.

- Paul is cut off and jeered at
- He could have skipped the resurrection, but he didn't
 - It is non-negotiable point
 - Never sacrifice the Gospel for cutesiness
 - We must never duck the Gospel

³³ So Paul departed from among them.

³⁴ Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.