

A WITNESS TO THE PAGAN WORLD

Acts 17:16-34

Someone who knows the depth of my affection for cats recently sent me an article entitled: “How to Bathe a Cat.”

1. Thoroughly clean the toilet and the required amount of shampoo to the toilet water, leaving the lid in the “up” position.
2. Get the cat and soothe him while you carry him towards the bathroom.
3. In one smooth movement and without warning, throw the cat in the toilet and close the lid (you may need to stand on the lid so that he cannot escape).
4. Flush the toilet three or four times. This provides a "power wash and rinse."
5. Open the door to the outside and then, standing behind the toilet as far as you can, quickly lift both lids.
6. The now-clean cat will rocket out of the toilet, and run outside where he will dry himself.

Sincerely, The DOG

You can talk to Paula and find out how she has inadvertently attempted variations on this technique. But today we are going to look at a different technique. It is a technique which Paul uses, not for achieving clean cats, but for clean hearts.

1. THERE IS A CORRELATION BETWEEN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD VERSUS YOUR SENSITIVITY TO SIN.

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols. (Acts 17:16).

Athens was a thoroughly pagan city. The crown of the city was its Parthenon, dedicated to the city’s namesake, the goddess Athena. Even today, people flock from all over the world to see the ruins of the Parthenon, to gaze at its magnificent columns.

Paul had come to Athens for a breather. He was on vacation. He was sightseeing like a good tourist. But the sights included all manners of idols. Pliny says that there were over 30,000 idols in Athens during this time in history. It was a saying that it was easier to find a god in Athens than it was to find a man.

Paul sees this gross idolatry. He sees the temples to all of the pagan deities. He sees the cultic sensual worship. He sees a city going to hell. At this point, he could no longer be silent. He is constrained to speak.

Are you provoked by sin? Does it provoke you to speak out? As we live in an increasingly pagan society, a danger that we face is that we are no longer provoked by sin. It no longer repels us. It becomes a part of our social background and, like a shot of spiritual novocaine, we become deadened to its effects.

I have seen death a number of times in my career as a fire fighter. It is a part of my job. And to a certain extent, I think that I have become a bit hardened to it. Exposure leads to hardening.

How can we combat this deadening process? By becoming alive to the gospel and tender to the Scriptures which set it forth. By coming to the cross and embracing it through faith. By believing the gospel each day.

2. THERE IS A CORRELATION BETWEEN YOUR EXCITEMENT ABOUT GOD VERSUS YOUR OPPORTUNITY TO TALK ABOUT HIM.

So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. (Acts 17:17).

Paul comes to Athens and he doesn't know a soul in the entire city. There isn't a Christian to be found anywhere. Is that bad? No, it's good because it means that there are plenty of opportunities for harvest.

It is like the story of the two shoe salesmen that went to a community in the interior of Africa. One wrote back, "I am coming home as there is no market for our product. No one wears shoes here." The other salesman wrote back, "Send more shoes; there is a tremendous opportunity for sales. No one wears shoes here yet!"

Paul looked at this pagan city and he saw opportunity. As was his custom, he first directed his attention to the synagogue. Why did he do this? It is because they

already had a knowledge of God’s word and they could build upon their faith.

But Paul didn’t limit his evangelistic efforts to once a week or to the locale of the synagogue. His Christianity did not stay within the four walls of the church. He took it out into the marketplace.

Do you have a marketplace faith? Or do you keep your faith safely tucked away to be brought out only when you come to church? Paul had a very simple strategy of evangelism. Anyone who happened to be around him was evangelized. He was always talking about the gospel and if you found yourself within earshot of Paul, then you could not help but to hear the gospel.

What do people hear when they are around you? They hear whatever it is about which you are passionate. If you love fishing, then they hear about fish. If you love sports, then that will be the thing they hear from you. Go to God and ask Him for a passion for the Lord. And then speak out from your passion.

3. THERE IS A CORRELATION BETWEEN THE AMOUNT YOU SPEAK OUT FOR CHRIST VERSUS THE AMOUNT OF CRITICISM YOU WILL RECEIVE.

And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, “What would this idle babbler wish to say?” Others, “He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,” -- because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. (Acts 17:18).

There are two philosophical groups mentioned here who had dealings with Paul in Athens. While they were set apart and distinct from one another, they had both missed the truth.

Epicureans	Epicures founded a school in Athens in 300 B.C. He taught that there are no gods. His philosophy was that of 1 Corinthians 15:32 - “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” They denied a future judgment or even that God has a hand in any present actions. There is no afterlife and when you are dead, you are dead so enjoy the present.	Emphasized pleasure (pleasure is defined simply as freedom from pain)
------------	---	---

Stoics	Zeno (342-270 B.C.) Taught that god is everywhere and that the world is under an impersonal force of natural law. When we die, we are absorbed back into the divine.	Emphasized accepting whatever comes in life.
--------	--	--

Epicureans: “Enjoy life!”

Stoics: “Endure life!”

Paul is going to tell them how to **obtain** life.

There is a sense in which anyone who has rejected God will fall into one of these two camps. If you are an Epicurean, you will say, “There is no meaning to life, so enjoy it while you can.” By contrast, the Stoic says, “There is no meaning to life, but live as though there were.”

These two philosophies are diametrically opposed. But they do agree on one thing. They both agree that they are opposed to the message of the gospel. What is it about the gospel that they are opposed?

Both of these philosophies agreed on several points.

- There is no personal God.
- There is no purpose in life.
- There is no such thing as a resurrection from the dead.

And here is Paul preaching of a personal Messiah who has come and who has died for sins and who has risen from the dead and who promises that those who believe will one day rise as well.

And so, they resort to name-calling. Whenever someone resorts to name-calling, you can realize that they have no better argument to offer.

They call Paul a *idle babbler* - *σπερμολογος* - literally, a “seed picker.” It describes one who would pick bits and pieces from different philosophies.

And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming?”

“For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean.”

Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to

spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new. (Acts 17:19-21).

The place to which they brought Paul was known as the “Areopagus.” This comes from two Greek words. *Ares* was the Greek god of war; known to the Romans as Mars. *Pagus* is Greek for “hill.” This is why some translations refer to this as “Mars Hill.” But it was more than merely a place named after a Greek war god. The Areopagus was connected to the Acropolis of Athens by a narrow ridge. On the top of this hill was the traditional meeting place for the judicial body of Athens. We would call it “capitol hill.” Unfortunately for the Athenians, they were no longer in charge of their own government. Like most of the rest of the known world, they were under the rulership of Rome. And so, the Areopagus had become a meeting place for discussion regarding philosophy.

As we read this, we are inclined to think, “How wonderful are these Athenians! They have a desire to know the truth.” But their love was not for the truth; it was a love of innovation and newness. They loved innovation for innovation’s sake. And this made them fickle.

4. THERE IS A CORRELATION BETWEEN YOUR AWARENESS OF THE SPIRITUAL VERSUS YOUR ABILITY TO USE THAT AWARENESS AS AN INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL.

So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects.

“For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’ Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. (Acts 17:22-23).

Paul does not immediately begin talking about Jesus. Neither does he quote from the Old Testament or appeal to the Jewish prophets. Instead he starts where they are. He starts with something to which they can relate. He points to one of their pagan altars.

Greek tradition had it that a mysterious plague once swept through the city of Athens. All sorts of cures were attempted and nothing worked. The people assumed that one of the city’s many gods had been offended. But which one? There were thousands of pagan deities. Athens was the god capital of the world.

And so, the citizens called in a consultant; a prophet from the island of Crete. His

name was Epimenedes. He concluded that the plague was the handiwork of some unknown god which had been offended.

Epimenedes ordered that a flock of hungry sheep be turned loose on the Areopagus. They watched the sheep and whenever any one of the sheep would lie down and not eat, an altar was erected on that spot and the sheep was sacrificed to the unknown god. Presumably there were a number of such altars which had been built.

It was now many hundreds of years later, but there still remained at least one such altar to the unknown god. We do not know for certain that it dated all the way back to the time of Epimenides, but its distinction was the same. And it is to this altar that Paul now directs the attention of his hearers.

“You Athenians have been worshiping at one particular altar who is known as the UNKNOWN GOD. Let me tell you about Him.”

There are a lot of wrong perceptions about God today. They border on downright paganism.

- The impersonal force from Star Wars.
- The higher power of alcoholics anonymous.
- The “man upstairs.”

But instead of walking up to someone and calling them a pagan, how about introducing them to the God in whom they claim to believe?

Paul answers both the Epicureans as well as the Stoics.

- They deny a personal God -- He shows them the God who is both personal and yet who transcends the little petty gods of the Greek pantheon.

“The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; ²⁵ nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things (Hebrews 17:24-25).

These two philosophies had rejected the idea of the little petty gods which were worshiped by the Greeks – Gods who had all of the frailties of

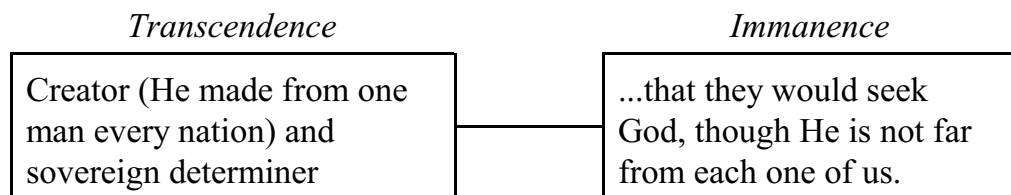
humans.

Paul says, “You are right! God isn’t like that at all.” He is the Creator of the world and doesn’t need your little temples.

- They deny human purpose – He demonstrates how that God’s ordination of man’s life gives him a unique and special purpose.

And He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, ²⁷ that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸ for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’” (Acts 17:26-27).

Do you see what Paul presents to these pagan unbelievers? It is the message of a sovereign God who has ordained all things under the sun. But it is not just the transcendence of God which is presented. It is also the nearness of God which is seen. God is both the God of all the universe as well as being a personal God who listens to your individual prayers. These are held in tension.



- They rejected the small petty gods of Greece and so did Paul.

He cites their own pagan poets to get them to see that even their own culture affirms the idea that God is there.

Two poets are cited: *SOME of your poets have said* (17:28).

- (a) *In Him we live and move and exist.*
 Epimenedes, a Cretan poet writing from the 6th century B.C. refers to Minos of Crete attacking Zeus and making this statement. In the same poem he speak the line which Paul quotes in Titus 1:12. Callimachus (3rd

century B.C.) utilized the same line in his hymn to Zeus.

(b) *For we also are His offspring.*

This line is also found in more than one poet.

- Aratus, a Cilician who lived not far from Tarsus, has this quote in the 5th line of his poetic work on astronomy entitled *Phaenomena* (315 B.C.).
- Cliontes, in his hymn to Zeus.

In both of these quotes, the reference is made in a context which speaks of Zeus.

How can Paul use these quotes? Paul believes that the reason for these quotes and the false religions to which they hold is the misapplied light of natural revelation.

He is not says that they know God. Indeed, he started his entire sermon with the recognition that they did NOT know Him and that they even showed a realization that they did not know Him by having an altar to the UNKNOWN GOD.

Are these poets cited in lieu of citing Old Testament Scripture? No. These poets were talking about Zeus in the context of their writings. Paul only quotes them as illustrative.

“Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. (Acts 17:29).

Do you see the point of the argument? We are people. We have “person-ness.” If we have personality, then it only follows that the One who created up also has personality. That is why any view of God as merely an impersonal force must of necessity be wrong. Impersonal cannot created personal. That is what is wrong with evolutionary philosophy. It can make all sorts of theories, but it cannot explain how the impersonal can create the personal.

5. THERE IS A CORRELATION BETWEEN REVELATION AND RESPONSIBILITY.

“Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, ³¹ because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.” (Acts

17:30-31).

Verse 30 says that God has "*overlooked the times of ignorance.*" What does this mean? The same idea is taught in Acts 14:16 where God "*permitted all the nations to go their own ways.*"

Something wonderful happened when the church began. There was an evangelism explosion and it sent the gospel throughout the entire world. Prior to this time, if you wanted to hear the gospel you had to come to Israel. But now the gospel came to you.

That brings a tremendous responsibility. It is a responsibility to repent - to turn to God and to be saved. There are three things that underscore this need for repentance.

- a. There is an inescapable day coming.

God has fixed a day when he will judge the world. Everyone knows this. You know it, don't you? You know there is a day coming when your life is going to be laid open before everyone, and all the value of it, or the lack of value, will be evident. There is coming a day when every life will be evaluated.

- b. There is an unchallengeable Judge.

The One who will do the evaluating will not be a god, remote upon Mount Olympus, but he will be a Man, someone who has lived right here with us, who knows what human life is like, who has felt everything we feel. He will be the One who passes judgment on that day.

- c. God has given us the evidence of the resurrection.

I believe this to be the ultimate apologetic. God took a dead man and made Him alive. That is where Christianity ultimately rests. If you can disprove the resurrection of Jesus, you can destroy Christianity in one blow. But as long as that fact remains unshaken and undestroyed, Christianity is indestructible. It rests upon that one great demonstrable fact -- that God raised Jesus from the dead. That is the guarantee that all God says ***will happen.***

6. THERE IS A CORRELATION BETWEEN THE CONDITION OF YOUR

HEART VERSUS YOUR REACTION TO THE GOSPEL

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this."

So Paul went out of their midst.

But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them. (Acts 17:32-34).

There are always one of three reactions to the gospel. When people hear they will initially do one of three things.

- a. Rejection: *Some began to sneer*
- b. Reluctance: *Others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this."*
- c. Repentance: *Some men joined him and believed*

There are initially one of three reactions to the gospel. But eventually there are only two. Reluctance does one of two things. It moves either in one direction or the other. Every time you hear the message of the gospel, your heart is moved in one of these two directions.