

Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

R₂L – Resolved to Live: Reaching a Pluralistic Culture for Christ Acts 17:16-34 (Part 1)

16 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. 17 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. 18 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. 19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? 20 “For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean.” 21 (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)

As I have been driving around town, I have been noticing a bumper sticker that more and more people seem to be placing on their cars. Maybe you have seen it as well. Using the icons of several different groups, religious or otherwise, the word that is spelled out is “COEXIST”. As you might see in the picture, Islam, Pacifism, Gay and Lesbianism, Judaism, Paganism, Taoism, and Christianity are all brought together. There is a movement all across the world, within governments, even within cultures, for all religions to peacefully coexist and meld into one happy group, not trying to proselytize, evangelize or convert one another, but simply to accept that what may be true for one person does not necessarily have to be true for another person. Therefore, we are called to COEXIST. Coexisting is fine. I am all for that. However, COEXIST implies that we should not criticize the beliefs of people who cling to their ideals or faiths. And that is ridiculous. By all means, treat all people with respect. Their ideas and beliefs, though, are fair game for scrutiny.

Beloved, there is such a thing as truth. There are absolutes. How do I know this? Well, the Bible tells me so, but for those that need something else, the next time somebody tries to tell you that there is no such thing as truth, simply reply, “Is that true?” For if the statement is true, then there is truth and their statement is...well, false. And if that statement is not true, then we need to be on a quest for the truth. And the idea behind COEXIST has some real problems as well. Not trying to be overly humorous with such a topic, but listen: *Islam wants to kill homosexuals, Jews, and Christians, for they are infidels. If Islam got its way, Taoism and Paganism would convert or die. Pacifism can only offer non-violent resistance to Islam. The problem is Islam has no trouble suppressing dissent with violence, so Pacifism would be wiped out. Homosexuality has been condemned by all major religions, which makes it intolerant of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Judaism is threatened with annihilation not only by Islam, but also by Pacifism who supports Islam over Judaism. Paganism and Taoism are statistically insignificant but were needed to help the bumper sticker spell an actual word - COEXIST.*

Now what COEXIST is promoting is nothing new. It is called “pluralism”. Pluralism is the belief that diversity of religious and cultural viewpoints are to be melded together for the greater good of people and thus stands in opposition to any one single approach, method, or interpretation of truth. Religiously, pluralism says, “All roads lead to heaven. All spiritual journeys are legitimate paths. No one person or group has the right or duty to say that their road to

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heaven, enlightenment, nirvana, or whatever it might be called, is any better than others. Groups like “COEXIST” and those people who espouse pluralism believe that it is the mark of civilized society to recognize and embrace the validity of different beliefs. The important thing is that you believe that your chosen path will take you where you want to go. That is, of course, unless you believe that there is no path out of this world, and if you do, that too is a valid belief simply because you have chosen to believe it.” The problem is that the truth is the truth, even if no one believes it. And a lie is still a lie even if everyone believes it.

This air of pluralism, of being content with allowing people to believe whatever they want without an attempt to lead them into the truth of God’s Word, is what we breathe in daily. While pluralism sounds humanitarian, peaceful, and respectfully tolerant; it is absurd and filled with logical fallacies that all paths lead to heaven. Beyond the fact that it contradicts Scripture and specifically, for example, the words of Jesus who said in John 14:6, **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me”**; it is also erroneous. How can anyone think that a person can take *any* road and end up at the same location? Practically speaking, even a pluralist does not live life like this. Let me ask you, if you intended to go to Tulsa from Bentonville, can you take any road to get there? Can I take and stay on I-540 to get to Tulsa? No, it runs north to south and Tulsa is west. Can I take State Highway 23 to get to Tulsa? It does not matter how hard you *believe* one of these roads will get you there, it simply will not happen. And when a pluralist takes a trip to Tulsa, or to Dallas, or to Kansas City, he knows that not all roads will get him there. But when such a person plans a trip to heaven, he creates his own map and yet does not see the inconsistency.

Now, while I do not; and it would be my assumption that most of you do not as well, believe in pluralism. But, as is evident on bumper stickers, in the news media and in our culture, we live in an increasingly and predominately pluralistic society. “Can’t we all just get along?” is the mantra! This really means, “Religious beliefs are a personal matter and civilized people do not discuss or try to convert others from their beliefs.” Our culture, by and large, does not believe that Jesus is the only way, the only truth, and the only life. Following Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Maharishi Yogi are all viable roads on the journey to heaven. This is the pluralistic air we breathe. So, how do we reach and evangelize people who believe such things? As I said, this is not a new way of thinking. The church has had to confront pluralism throughout the ages. And, as is true with every dilemma we encounter, we must look to the Word of God and see how it addresses the issue head-on. And this issue is nowhere more clearly addressed than in our text of Acts 17:16-34.

Here Paul is confronting not only the problem of pluralism, but also the sinister daughter of pluralism; namely polytheism. What is polytheism? It is the acceptance and worship of many gods. Pluralism teaches that there are many ways to God. Polytheism simply takes that a step further and says there are many gods, so take your pick. Not only will all roads get you to heaven, but any god who you believe in will get you where you want to be. No doubt that Paul and his team came across this kind of thinking as it was rampant throughout the Roman Empire. You could believe in whatever or however many gods you want to as long as you did not discredit any of the other paths or gods. This kind of thinking was found in its most aggressive, most accepted and most philosophized form in the city of Athens. We are going to learn from this account not only that people who live in a pluralistic culture can be reached for Christ, but also how they are to be reached for Christ.

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Now, as it typical for me, I have no intention of trying to cram all of this into one sermon. As we are establishing ourselves here in the Bentonville community, and as we are seeking to be intentional in reaching NW Arkansas for Christ, we must not only be taught how to reach people for Christ, but we must also remind ourselves to actually reach people for Christ.

I have divided up this passage of Acts 17:16-34 into two parts. The first is the *reminder* to reach people, in this case, those who believe in pluralism, with the gospel of Christ (17:16-21); and the second is the *method* Paul uses to reach this pluralistic culture (17:22-34). We will spend time on this first point, the reminder to reach people with the gospel of Christ. Simply put, there must be contact (integration; infiltration) and then there must be communication (information).

I. The reminder to reach people with the gospel of Christ (16-21)

As we read verses 16-21, Luke is actually reminding us of something which we have already come to see in the life of Paul. Luke is recording a pattern in the life of Paul, a pattern, a way of life which would yield the results of people coming to know Christ. Remember that Luke has a limited amount of space, and so for him to take the time to journal such thoughts means it is important.

And just what is it that Luke wants us to see? Notice what we find Paul doing as we read again from verses 16-17, “16 Now while Paul was waiting for them [Silas and Timothy] at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols. 17 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.”

Paul was observing, taking notice, learning about, seeking to understand the people, a people who were head deep in idolatry, polytheism and thus, pluralism. Armed with this information, he engaged the people in both the religious setting (the synagogue) as well as in the secular setting (the marketplace). And how often did he do this? He did this “every day.” Beloved, we are being reminded that without contact, there is no impact. If we do not engage people with the gospel, there is no evangelism for the gospel!

Let me remind that here we have Paul still in the middle of his second missionary journey which started back at the end of Acts 15 when he and Silas left Antioch. They traveled westward through what is modern day Turkey and then made it to Europe, preaching in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea; each time being run out of town for preaching the gospel. When Paul left Berea, Silas and Timothy stayed behind as he headed some 200 miles south to his new God-given assignment in Athens. Remember that verse 15 ends with Paul’s request for Silas and Timothy to come join him.

But Paul would not be caught just waiting around, killing time, before he engaged the people. Luke informs us that upon his arrival in Athens, something provoked his spirit. What was it? The city was full of idols; symbols of false gods and false thinking. I know that many of you are here today, grateful that God has saved you; considering yourself blessed to know Jesus Christ as Savior. But I also know that many of you feel as though you are missing something when it comes to helping others come to know Christ. What can you do? What must you do? Beloved, here is the reminder; something we have already seen a number of times in the book of Acts. If you want to help people know Jesus, you must take the message of Jesus to the people! We must be a people who are intentional in infiltrating into the lives of others for the purpose of informing them about the gospel, the good news that Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

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We must be resolved to be engaged and involved in the lives of others. How can we do this? From our text, we can glean three means, reminders of things we have already seen in the life of Paul, actions by which we are to reach people for Christ.

A. We must understand our culture (16)

Now while Paul was waiting for them [Silas and Timothy] at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols.

While in Athens, Paul saw a city full of idols. The word “full” means utterly overflowing in idolatry. You see, Athens was the center of Greek culture, culture that influenced the world. In its prime, Athens was the greatest city in the world. The great philosopher Socrates, his famous student Plato, and his renowned student Aristotle all taught in Athens. So did Epicurus, founder of Epicureanism, and Zeno, founder of Stoicism, two important philosophers as we will see shortly.

By the time Paul had arrived, Athens had lost some of its influence. Corinth had become more of the political and commercial center in Greece. But Athens was still the crown jewel of Greece culturally and philosophically. Athens was home to the world’s most famous university and attracted just about every religion in the world of that day. The city was literally overflowing with statues of gods. Every public building was dedicated to a god. There were so many religions and gods in Athens that the pagan writer Petronius sarcastically quipped that it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man. By the time of Paul, there were around 15,000 people living in Athens, but there were also more than 30,000 statues of gods!

Athens was a city of beauty from her temples, to the sculptures, to the monuments, and to the magnificent Parthenon. It was all there in glorious grandeur as Paul stepped foot into the city. But what did Paul see? There is not one mention of the city’s splendor. All he could see were the idols. Luke says that this all “provoked” Paul’s spirit. The word “provoke” is a strong and violent word. It means “to become angry, or infuriated.” Luke used the noun form to describe the “sharp disagreement” between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:39 when they disputed over Mark’s coming along on the second missionary journey. It has been said that Paul would have been about as much at home in Athens as a bust of Luther would be in the Vatican.”

Paul saw the idolatry. To put it in today’s terms, he saw the pluralism, the ready acceptance of any and all teachings about life, lifestyles, religion and God; and it *incensed* him. Why would a Christian be incensed by the beliefs of other religions and philosophies? Because we, like Paul, know there is only one true God. Consider; if people are worshiping idols, following other gods, pursuing other so-called truths, it means they are not worshiping the true God. That ought to provoke us. It ought to distress us. Why? Let me give you two reasons. First, those who worship false gods, follow paths other than the path Jesus laid down, are on the broad path to destruction. They will perish eternally. But there is a second reason, an often neglected reason why we ought to be incensed at the pluralistic thinking of our culture; and it is this, that those who follow their own self-prescribed paths, worshipping whatever false gods that motivate them, are actually robbing God of the worship *He* deserves.

Why should Hope Community Bible Church want to reach NW Arkansas with the message and truth of Christ? What is our greatest motivation to see people come to know the truth about Jesus as Savior and Lord? Too often we think only in terms of the good for those who hear and believe in the message of Christ. Indeed, the gospel of Christ is good for people, particularly for those who believe. But the greatest reason for spreading the gospel is this; *our God is worthy of*

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worship that He is not receiving. Let that sink in. Our prayer ought to be that of the Psalmist who wrote in Psalm 67:3-4, **“3 Let the peoples praise You, O God; Let all the peoples praise You. 4 Let the nations be glad and sing for joy; For You will judge the peoples with uprightness And guide the nations on the earth.”** The world, our country, our state, our cities, our neighborhoods, our schools, our places of work, are full of people who are failing to worship the one true God because they have bought the lie of pluralism.

Yet, our Lord Jesus was clear. He clearly stated what the one true God is looking for. In John 4:23-24 we read, **“23 But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”** Are you a worshiper of the one true God, one who worships in spirit, that is, as I understand it, by the power of the Holy Spirit and in the truth of God’s Word? This is the motivation for missions. This is the energy for evangelism. This is the octane for outreach. Let me ask you, as you drive to church, as you go from place to place, from neighborhood to neighborhood, what do you see? Do you see nice homes, or maybe some run down homes? Do you see new construction, or perhaps deterioration? Or do you see within the possibility, the potential, the promise of true worshippers who will worship the one true God according to His truth? This is what God sees. In the midst of a pluralistic culture, He sees those who will be saved out of it, just like Abraham was saved out of the pluralist culture of Ur of the Chaldees. We must understand our culture and reach them with the gospel. But there is more.

B. We must underscore our contact (17)

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.

Now we have some realtors in our congregation. How important is it for them to make contact with people if they are going to sell a person’s home or help them buy a home? It is imperative. Without contact, there is no impact.

We need to be reminded as to what it really is that the unsaved need. They do not “need” a spiritual pep talk. They do not “need” to be told some principles by which they might manage their finances better; might fight depression; or might get them promoted at work. What the unsaved “need” to hear is the truth. And notice what Paul did with both unsaved religious people as well as unsaved non-religious people. Luke says that **“he was reasoning”** with the people by going to wherever the people were.

We are actually told of three places where Paul made contact while in Athens. Here in verse 17 it was in the synagogue and also in the marketplace. Dropping down to verse 19 we also see went to Areopagus (a fun word to say), a public meeting place where religious debates were held. What I would have you notice is that we cannot expect to reach the unsaved in just one manner. Paul not only went to where unsaved people were, but he would also have to adjust his approach depending on what kind of group he found himself with. Do you find yourself going to unsaved people? And if you do, do you go to them with the intention of speaking the truth?

Beloved, some unsaved people will come to church if we only go to them and invite them. Other will never come to a church, but they might come to a school venue; or a home; or a church activity in the park; or even simply to lunch. There is only one truth; one gospel, one Lord, and one faith. But there are numerous ways to present the truth to unsaved people. But nothing can

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be presented without contact. We cannot underscore the importance of this enough. Will you resolve to go to unsaved people with the purpose of telling them the truth about Jesus? Let me give you one final reminder.

C. We must never undermine our circumstances (18-21)

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.

As mentioned before, Athens was home to multiple schools of philosophy. Luke tells us that Paul actually was preaching to two rival groups of thought, the Epicureans and the Stoics. Most of you have probably heard of the Stoics before. Stoics were those who believed that that people should be free from passion, unmoved by joy or grief, and submit without complaint to unavoidable necessity. They did show emotion but emphasized human self-sufficiency and intellect. Their mantra was “Deny your emotions! Live life on reason alone.”

In contrast to the Stoics were the Epicureans. They believed that happiness and pleasure were the highest good. Their mantra would have been, “Eat, drink, and be merry.” They believe there is no afterlife and so they ought to live it up, experience anything and everything to its fullness. As one commentator put it, “The Epicureans said, ‘Enjoy life!’ and the Stoics said, ‘Endure life!’ but it remained for Paul to explain how they could enter into life through faith in God’s risen Son.”

As these two groups listened to Paul, they accused him of being an “idle babbler” – a person who was picking up little pieces of thoughts from here and there but not putting them together in any understandable way. The word “babbling,” literally means “seed picker” and was used to describe birds picking up grain and seeds. The philosophers used it to derogatorily describe a person who peddled the ideas of others without understanding them. They accused Paul of being a philosophical plagiarist. Let me remind you that when we share the truth about Jesus as Lord and Savior, about man in his condition of sin and the necessity for repentance and faith in Jesus, it turns some people off. 1 Corinthians 2:14 tells us that the Word of God is foolishness to the natural mind. However, we also know that it is God who opens up heart and minds to receive the truth; to provide opportunities for sharing the gospel in which some will be saved. Paul experienced both of these responses.

Reading again verses 19-21, “19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? 20 “For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean.” 21 (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)” Some mocked Paul, but some were intrigued by his “strange things” – that is foreign, unheard of things. Notice the circumstances; they are opportunities. They wanted to hear more and invited him to come to the Areopagus. The Areopagus was a meeting place named for Ares, the Greek god of war. This was the rock or hill of Ares. The Roman equivalent to Ares was the god Mars and this is where the name “Mar’s Hill” comes from.

It was at this place that the men of Athens condemned Socrates some four centuries earlier. Do you know what Socrates was condemned for? Socrates’ accusers cited two “impious” acts: “failing to acknowledge the gods that the city acknowledges” and “introducing new deities”.

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Now, Paul shows up, failing to acknowledge the gods that the city acknowledges and for introducing a new deity, Jesus Christ. But here we see that our God opened a wide door of opportunity for Paul to proclaim the truth. Beloved, will you be as faithful and ready and resolve never to undermine, or disregard an opportunity to share Christ?

I have reminded you of three things. We must understand our culture; understand how they think. We must underscore our contact, our involvement in the lives of unsaved people. Do you see it as important to have contact with the lost? Finally, we must never undermine (consider as unimportant) the circumstance and opportunities God give us to make Jesus known. This is our calling; this is our purpose; to make Jesus known; that He has come to save the lost; to die for our sins; to give us true life and the hope of eternal life if we would but believe we need saving and He is the only Savior.



Soli Deo Gloria

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