

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 Pluralist Culture for Christ Acts 17:16-34 (Part 2)

Acts 17:22-34

22 So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. 23 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.

As we have been journeying through Acts 17, we have been noting a distinctive pattern in the life of Paul, a pattern that he used to reach people for Jesus Christ; a pattern, which I believe, is to be imitated and integrated into our lives. Thus far Paul has reached those of semi-religious, irreligious, and pagan backgrounds in Thessalonica by...

1. Going to where the people were (17:1)
2. Using the Scriptures unashamedly (17:2)
3. Putting the focus on Christ (17:2-3)
4. Emphasizing the work of Christ on the Cross (17:3)
5. Giving evidence that faith in Christ is “reasonable” (17:2-3)
6. Allowing the Holy Spirit to work in His time (17:2)

Then, moving on to Berea, Paul reached a more religious group of Bereans by once again employing the strategies he used in Thessalonica. From there, we find Paul in Athens, Greece; the crown jewel of philosophical tolerance and culture. In this grand city was a melting pot of nearly every known philosophical and theological thought. Anything goes; anything was acceptable; anything was worthy of consideration. This was the pluralistic culture of Athens. All roads lead to heaven; all ways of thinking bring enlightenment, therefore, let us embrace and engage all religious, philosophical and political ways of thinking, with the possible exception of an exclusive way of thinking; of any thought that said in effect that their way was the only way, the right way, the exclusive way. And of course, this is where Christianity runs counter with pluralism. Instead of teaching all religions provide a way, a truth and a life; Christianity says that Jesus is the way, the truth and they life and the only way to the Father.

This was the culture that Paul was encountering in Athens, a city with over 30,000 statues of gods, a community where every building was dedicated to a god, a way of thinking and living. Let me remind you that this is not unlike the culture we live in. Indeed, as we see in Thessalonica and Berea, we live among semi-religious, non-religious and even very religious people who need to be reached with the gospel. Additionally, we live in a culture very much like Athens, a kind of “anything goes”; take your pick approach to life and religion that believes so long as it works for you; no one should question it, or challenge you with other ways of thinking. Using biblical language; **“everyone did what was right in his own eyes”** (Judges 21:25).

How is a believer to address such a culture? How are we supposed to interact with such thinking? Should Christians just quietly exist? Should Christian lay low, say little or nothing, be unengaged and uninvolved in such a culture? If we take the example of Paul, the answer is unequivocally, “no”! We, like Paul, must infiltrate the enemy’s territory, those blinded by the schemes and wiles of the devil. If we learn anything about evangelism from the life of Paul it is that he is constantly going, engaging, getting himself in the midst of unsaved people for the single

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purpose of telling them about Jesus. And whenever Paul found himself around people, whether in the synagogue, the marketplace, the court, or even in the church, he used Scripture to point people to Christ.

Last week, we noted how Luke is carefully revealing this pattern in the life of Paul, this going to the people to share the Scriptures that point people to Christ. We noted three things about Paul’s approach to the Athenians, first that he sought to understand that culture. He realized how open the people were to all sorts of religious and philosophical thinking as he saw the city was “full of idols” (17:16). Whether your neighborhood, your workplace, or even your city as a whole, do you seek to understand what drives such people spiritually? Maybe they are open and tolerant to all sorts of ideas; maybe they are not spiritually minded at all; or maybe they are very religious, going to church, but their lives reveal little or nothing of a commitment to Jesus Christ. But do you understand your culture?

We also were reminded that we must underscore, that is regard as most important our contact with people. Beloved, Christians ought not to see their homes as personal hideaways from people; but rather as home field advantage by which to speak to people about Christ. Christians are to be known for their hospitality, their love of those around them; their desire to make known their faith and values through their homes and through the extension of their home, the church. Without contact, there is not impact.

Finally, we noted that we must not undermine our circumstances. Sometimes the hard and trying circumstance that we look upon as a total “bummer” is really a God-given opportunity to make Jesus known. Later in Paul’s life, he would find himself imprisoned for preaching the gospel; under guard, unable to go from place to place proclaiming Christ. To most, it would seem to be a real setback. Paul was removed from the game so to speak. But listen to how Paul thinks about this circumstance; not as a setback, but as a special opportunity to make Jesus know. In Philippians 1:12-14 we read,

12 Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, 13 so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, 14 and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.

Oh, that we would have such an outlook on our circumstances. But all of this brings us to our text this morning. Having seen Paul’s pattern for reaching people with the gospel, Acts 17:22-34 reveals to us how Paul seized this opportunity to point these people to just one God out of the many they might consider as being the only true God.

Can you imagine being Paul here? Surrounded by some keen philosophical minds, intent on getting them to see that there is only one God with whom they must concern themselves. Talk about intimidating. If you have ever done door-to-door evangelism, or open-air evangelism, you can know what it is like to put yourself out there for others to potentially attack verbally. But one thing I have learned from such experiences, that just showing up, just making contact with people does not constitute evangelism. As we are going door-to-door inviting people to church, we are doing little to no evangelism; we are just inviting people to church; for evangelism to take place, there must be a sharing of the gospel. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ. To simply build a bridge of relationship does not save anyone. We must open our mouths and speak to people about the person and work of Jesus.

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Having seen Paul’s pattern of getting to the people, let us look at our verses this morning, noting the example of Paul in presenting the gospel to this pluralistic, anything goes group of people. In putting together of an outline, I give you a gardening analogy to summarize Paul’s method of speaking to the men of Athens. I think this is a safe outline because our Lord Jesus used gardening and farming parables to teach how to reach unsaved people. So, if reaching a pluralistic culture is like gardening, we must we do to see this garden to produce fruit for Jesus Christ. I offer you four steps.

A. We must prepare the soil (22-23).

22 So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. 23 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.

Anyone who has sought to have a productive garden knows that you must first begin with preparing the soil; leveling the ground, removing rocks and weeds, breaking up the hard dirt and enriching it for the plants. How is this done in speaking to other about Jesus? Let me remind you where this gardening analogy breaks down for us. A garden takes time, a day or two, maybe more to prepare the soil, then there is the planting, watering, weeding and waiting. Then weeks after you begin, you start to see some fruit. When speaking to others about Jesus, you are seeking to walk through all the gardening steps at one setting. You may not be able to, but that is the goal. It begins with preparing the soil. What does this look like when talking to others about Jesus? Notice two things Paul does to prepare the soil.

First, *look for common ground.* See how Paul addresses the men in verse 22 saying, “*I observe that you are very religious in all respects.*” He knows this is a connection between what they believe and what he believes. However, notice that he does not make more of this than it really is. He did not say, “Men of Athens, I see that you are believers in God.” He used the term “religious” – a word that really speaks of being highly superstitious; not wanting to offend any god. Just because someone wears a cross, quotes some scripture, seeks to live a “good and moral” life does not make him right with God. But find that common ground that you can work with.

Second, *show an interest in other’s lives.* In verse 23 Paul tells them how he had walked through the city, noting the things that mattered to them. He is making contact, personal. He is understanding their culture, what makes them tick.

One of the reasons why you and I may not be effective in talking to others about Jesus is that we do not take enough time to look and understand the people around us. If your unsaved neighbor is into gardening, then take an interest in gardening. If your unsaved classmate is into sports, take an interest. Ask him about his garden or the game. The point is that Paul let them know he was interested, starting with something that interested them before he would move to the more unfamiliar truths of the gospel. It is called building bridges. We must look for those bridges, those points of contact. Do you see what Paul’s point of contact was to be? It is found in verse 23, ***I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’*** Paul knew that they all had read those words and this would be his bridge to sharing the scriptures, which we must always include when pointing people to Jesus.

Beloved, the word of God tells us in Romans 2:15 that God has written His law on the heart of every person. This means that your unsaved friend or family member a conscience. To be sure, many ignore it but it whispers to them, sometimes it scream to them when they violates God’s law. For example, the first commandment says, ***“You shall have no other gods before Me”*** (Exodus 20:2). When a person lives for his or her job, they are violating this commandment. When a woman lives for her children, she is violating God’s Law. Why? Because a rival god has

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been created. Here is what Paul did that we need to learn to do as well. He noted the violation of God’s Law and this became a point of contact for sharing the gospel. Paul saw the idolatry and used that as his entry point to speaking about God and Christ.

Let me give you some more examples. Maybe you know an unsaved couple who is having marriage troubles. What is their problem? While they may not know or understand it, the problem is that one or both of them are in violation of God’s law. They are not so much having problems with one another as they are with God and that is why their marriage is in trouble. They are not living life God’s way; the husband is not husbanding God’s way or the wife is not wifeing God’s way.

Beloved, when a person violates God’s law and it becomes habit, his conscience of God’s law becomes hardened over. What can break through the hard heart of a sinner? Is it my personal pleading or my persuasive arguments? No, I might use those in conjunction with something else, for the tool that God has chosen to use to soften hearts is the Word of God. It is the Spirit of God who uses the Word of God to open hearts and minds to Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Do not mistake Paul’s acknowledgement of this altar to an unknown god, this monument set up so as not to offend any god that might have been missed with the 30,000 statues of other gods, this is not Paul commending the Athenians. He is not agreeing with their theology of pluralism and polytheism. He is simply using something they understand to that build a bridge to the gospel. This altar was erected so no god might be offended; but the truth of the matter is the true God that is unknown to them is offended by their acknowledgement of 30,000 other gods. There is an *unknown God* and Paul is about to tell them about Him. This is how Paul prepared the soil. Next then...

B. We must plant the seed (24-28)

24 “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; 26 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.’

I wish we had the time to examine Paul’s sermon in greater detail but we are simply needing to get the big picture. If there is one thing that stands out in Paul monologue is that the focus is on God. Would you notice with me three things Paul wants them to know about this unknown God. I believe we would do well to include this in our presentation of the gospel as well.

First, we must tell them *who God is!* This is what we read in verses 24-25, **24 “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;**

Before a person can be with God, he must know *who this God is*. Remember that Paul is speaking these words to a believe-it-all culture and to these polytheistic philosophers, Paul says that they unknown god is actually Creator of everything. That is how much power He has. He is the *Kurios* of heaven; the Lord of all. Then he tells them that this great God does not live in manmade objects (basically putting down all their buildings dedicated to gods) and then he tells them that this unknown God is so self-sufficient that He needs nothing from us at all. All the other gods were dependent upon their worshippers in some way, but not this unknown God. Rather,

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the worshippers of this unknown God need Him as He supplies us with everything and therefore we are all accountable to Him.

Paul is not afraid to tell people what they need to hear and these words would have ruffled the feathers of the Athenians. Just one God *made the world and all things in it*. But wait, the Epicurean believed that matter is eternal and had no creator. The Stoics were pantheists believing that everything, whether people or a plant, or a rock was all a little part of God. Beloved, if we would reach people for Jesus, we must start with who God is; telling them that He is the Creator. Sometimes Paul could assume this truth, for example, when speaking to Jews, for they already believed this, but if Paul was uncertain, he started with this truth because the Gentile mind was cluttered with false ideas about God and the origin of the universe. It is not so different for us today. We are surrounded with evolutionary theory that removes God from the question of where did we come from. For many, before we can tell people about God’s salvation we must tell people about *God*, that He is the *Creator*.

Second, we must tell people what God has done. In verse 26 we read, *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*.

What is it that God has done? He “made from one man every nation of mankind...” This flies in the face of the predominate thought of both that time as well as this time, that all things came into being through random, evolutionary processes. The one true God created one man and from that one man God made all the peoples of the earth. Do you know why we have racial problems? It is because of evolutionary thinking, that some species are better than others, that some races are better than others. But the Bible teaches us there is just one race, the human race. We are all children of Adam. This is what God has done. Additionally, Paul says that this God has determined the time and place of every nation. In other words, this one God is sovereign and does as He determines.

These are radical words to Paul’s audience. Paul is going after the heart of their false belief system. He is ripping out the foundation of their pluralistic polytheism. He tears at the heart of Athenian pride and Greek racial superiority. Man is not the pinnacle; no, God is at the center of all things. Beloved, if we would do evangelism well, we must present God’s truth in ways that affect the very lives of the hearers’ right where they are. So we tell them who God is, and what God has done; then...

Third, we must tell them what God desires. Reading from verses 27-28, *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.’*

What does this God who created us and all things desire? I can tell you this, he does not want to be ignored. His desire is that people would seek Him, even grope that is to feel around everywhere reaching out for Him. I think the words “*for Him*” are telling. The point is that we exist for God, for His pleasure and glory; not that God exists for our pleasure and glory.

Paul does something interesting here to make his point. He quotes from some secular Greek literature, the first quotation taken from the Cretan poet Epimenides (600 B.C.) and the second from the Cilician poet Aratus (300 B.C.). Paul used a word picture when said “***they might grope...and find Him.***” The Greek poet Homer used this very language in the well-known story of Cyclops.

“The giant one-eyed Cyclops had captured Odysseus and his men, and Odysseus had gotten him drunk and then blinded him with a sharp stake. The epic’s hero then wanted to sneak out of the

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cave where he and his men were being held. But it was difficult because Cyclops was groping around, feeling after Odysseus so that he might find him and kill him. That is the very word Paul uses. So it is as if he is saying: In our sin we are as blind as the blinded Cyclops. Nevertheless, because creation is still there, we have an obligation to feel after God and find him, even though we cannot see him.” (used from James M. Boice)

Paul did not quote from these poets because he agreed with everything they said. But he did know that because of God’s common grace, even unregenerate men can say true things. The point was that the knowledge of the true God is not far anyone who is open. Paul said that even their own poets have known that. Beloved, we do not to work our way to the Creator. He may be great, but he is also near, so near that you could know Him this very day. This was Paul planting the seed after he had already prepared the soil. So what is next? Once the ground is prepared and the seeds are planted, then...

C. We must pick the weeds (29-31)

29 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. 30 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.”

What happens to a garden that is left unattended? It produces weeds, weeds that smother the yield of the fruit. Beloved, the same is true in evangelism. If we do not do the weeding, the seed will be smothered. What do I mean by weeding in telling others about Jesus? I mean that we need to tell people some things that will have to happen if they are to experience God through Jesus Christ. Not only do we need to tell people who God is, what God has done, and what God desires, but we must also tell them what God requires; we must bring them to a point of response. Have you ever been given a special gift of some kind, something so great, so unexpected, so undeserved that you said in some form or another, “I don’t know how to respond?” (Usually we hear someone tell us, “Just say thank you!). Well, when telling people that they are responsible to the God who created them, that they have been blind and need to be saved, and that God is near, ready to save them, some simply do not know how to respond. Paul, anticipating this, tells his audience two responses, two things God requires to be right with Him.

First, *a person must repent.* Did you pick this up there in verse 30? *“people everywhere should repent.”*

From what does Paul call the Athenians to repent. We know the city was engaged in gross immorality. We know the Athenians were arrogant when it came to intellectual matters. But Paul calls them to repent from their refusal to acknowledge the existence of the Creator God to whom they were accountable. All their other sin issues stemmed from this.

Beloved, we must be clear with people that God does demand something, the first thing being to repent from the worship of false, man-made gods, and even for seeking to worship of the true God in false ways. Either of these must be stopped. How serious was Paul about this matter? He tells them in verses 30-31 that while God had overlooked such ignorance in the past, not meaning that He excused it but simply that He delayed punishing it, the day is coming when He will punish it all. Until that day comes, stop and turn from worshipping anyone or anything other than the one true God. This is what it means to repent. To turn to God.

Why is this repentance imperative? Because we read in verse 31, *because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed,*

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having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.” This is the climax of Paul’s sermon. He calls them to repent, but the second thing God requires for salvation...

Second, a person must know the truth about Jesus. Verse 31 is pointed...right at the person and work of Jesus. There is no question as to which Jesus Paul is speaking about. This is the true Jesus that God ordained to be the judge of the world, and the One whose authority God verified when He raised Him from the dead. What is the truth about Jesus; that He is Lord, and will come to judge all people by God’s standard of righteousness. This is the same Jesus that went to the cross, taking on the punishment of sin on behalf of all those who would trust in Him; the same Jesus who died for sin, but three days later rose from the dead to confirm He had power over sin and power to forgive all who trust in Him.

Beloved, biblical evangelism must confront a person’s sin, call for repentance, and then urge that person to believe in the real Jesus. Let me ask you, is this what you typically hear in gospel presentations today? I am afraid not. The typical approach begins with God’s love. We hear, “God loves you and that is why He sent His Son to die for you. Accept Jesus and God will save you.” Do you see how this does not present the gospel at all? For if God loves me so much, why do I need a Savior?

Did Paul start with God’s love? No, Paul started with God’s greatness, God’s holiness; God’s splendor as the Creator. This Creator desires and deserves something from you that you are not giving Him. God does not look upon sinners as “basically good” but rather as rebels in His world. Sinners who do what is right in their own eyes. Sinners who have failed to seek Him. And all of this not only displeases Him, but it inspires His righteous wrath. Up to this point, God has been exceedingly patient with you, but His patience has a limit. Thus, now is the time of repentance. Now is the time to know you are right with Him. And how does a person get right with God? You are made right when you turn to His Son, Jesus Christ, this One who is going to judge the world for its sin is the one who will bring you salvation if you trust that what He did on the cross He did for you.

How would this message be received by those Epicureans who believed in “Eat, drink and be merry!” Is Paul telling them that one day they will give an account for their actions? Yes, indeed. And we live among some modern day Epicureans, who think that our best life is to be lived now; our only life is to be lived now, so take it all in, whatever it is, good, bad, indifferent, just live! But part of our role in evangelism, in telling people about Jesus is to pick the weeds, telling people what must be done away with in order to truly live! So, we prepare the soil; we plant the seed, we pick the weeds; and finally...

D. We must praise God for the harvest (32-34)

32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, “We shall hear you again concerning this.” 33 So Paul went out of their midst. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

So, Paul proclaims the truth, this “philosophy” of his to a group of men who embrace and are tolerant of some 30,000 other ways of thinking. But know this, when we proclaim the truth of Christ in a pluralistic, anything goes culture, we can be assured of one of three responses but as we have seen here in Athens.

First, *some will sneer* (32). I am amazed that this otherwise tolerant group of men become intolerant when the preaching of the resurrection of Christ. Why, because to the unregenerate mind, the death and resurrection of Christ makes no sense, it is something spiritually understood when the Holy Spirit opens the mind. The verb “sneered” – meaning to mock or deride, might be

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translated that they “began to sneer”, marking an outbreak of derision against what Paul had said. Even after been so careful to consider their culture, to correct their thoughts on matters of purpose and racial interactions, some regarded Paul as a fool.

Second, *some will want to hear more* (33). While we must always seek to move people to respond to Jesus, that does not mean we force a decision. Some will need more time for the Spirit to work on their hearts. To use our garden analogy, the presenter of the gospel must not pick green fruit, but give the unsaved but inquisitive time to ripen in biblical truth. But there is a third response....

Third, *some will join and believe* (33). The implication of this verse is that one a small handful believed in Jesus. From what we know it would seem that Paul spent just a few weeks in Athens, and as far as we know, Paul did not even start a church there. Yet, Paul told these people the truth about Christ in terms they could understand, leaving the results to God. And there were results. We are told of Dionysius, a council member of the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris, and several others. Where the gospel is boldly preached, it will yield a harvest, even in the most difficult of soils. And whether God saves one, or one hundred or one thousand, we need to praise God!

So, how many roads do lead to heaven? The bible and therefore we must be clear as to the answer to this question; that as we make contact and communicate with unsaved people in this age of pluralism we tell them.

1. *There is one God.* He is the Creator of heaven and earth.
2. *There is one Savior.* He is the Son of God, Jesus Christ.
3. *There is one way.* Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

Community Bible Church

Soli Deo Gloria

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