Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

How to Confront the Culture
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
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As a pastor in Southern California, I have the blessed privilege of mining the truth from God's Word every week of my life. Doing that in Los Angeles only makes it more interesting, if for no other reason than the tremendous diversity of people, culture, and language here. When we take the gospel to our city, it's amazing to watch God's Word transcend the culture--and every false religion--to change lives. The message of salvation in Christ truly knows no hindrance.

If you think evangelism is a somewhat arduous task in that environment, you're right. We face a culture that has rejected absolute truth and now considers it stylish to openly embrace and encourage degrading passions. The ecumenical, syncretistic spirit of the age recoils in horror at the exclusive claims of Christ. And popular, evangelical seeker-sensitive churches only make the task more difficult by refusing to confront sin in an effort to make the "unchurched" sinner comfortable.

Preaching today is clearly out of season (2 Tim. 4:2) and evangelism is difficult, but that's nothing new. Paul faced worse challenges in his day. He faced an increasingly anti-Christian culture--there was no spirit of tolerance to shield believers from hostility. Still, he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ-a hard, uncompromising message of repentance. That is best illustrated in Acts 17:16-34 where Paul faced one of the most intellectually erudite and morally corrupt audiences ever--the philosophers on Mars Hill.

The Situation (Acts 17:16-21): Paul came to Athens after being forced to flee Thessalonica and Berea (Acts 17:1-15). Athens was the heart of Greek culture and thought, renowned for its art and philosophy and some of the most famous philosophers. The founders of two dominant philosophies, Epicurus (Epicureanism) and Zeno (Stoicism), had taught in Athens.

Athens was also the home of almost every man-made god in existence. The pagan writer Petronius once said it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man. In fact it was Athenian idolatry that drove Paul to preach the gospel in Athens--such idolatry offended him to the core (v. 16). In customary fashion, he marched directly to the local synagogue and was reasoning from the Scriptures (cf. v. 2) "with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present" (v. 17).

Some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers heard Paul's message in the market place and brought him to the Areopagus on Mars Hill before some of the most astute philosophers in Athens. They had no interest in the gospel; Paul was simply a novelty to them. They set him in their midst as a specimen that would amuse their interest in "telling or hearing something new" (v. 21). That's the setting for Paul's message and method for confronting a godless culture.

The Method (Acts 17:22-34): Paul spoke his message to an indifferent and arrogant audience, like many to whom you and I speak today. As we look at how Paul preached to the philosophers, you'll see three essential elements of an effective message to confront our post-Christian culture with the truth.

First, tell them that God is (vv. 22-23). Here's Paul's first point: "You are ignorant and I'm going to give you the truth." Try recommending that opening line at an evangelism conference. Some people think Paul commended their religiosity when he mentioned their many objects of worship. He wasn't commending them at all--their idols infuriated him (v. 16). Rather, he started with a given: all men are innately religious. All men are created to be worshipers--they either worship God or something else, but everyone worships something. The Athenians were no different.

Externally, God has given witness about Himself through what He created: "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands" (Ps. 19:1). Internally, according to Romans 1:19: "that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them." They have an innate sense of the true God of the Bible, His standards are written on their hearts, and their consciences hold them accountable (Rom. 2:14-15). But because of sin, they "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18). They willfully reject what they know to be true and choose instead to worship in ignorance.

Second, tell them who God is (vv. 24-29). This is Paul's lesson to the ignorant about the unknown God. This is Theology 101. It's ironic that Paul was teaching the ABCs of theology to those who were known worldwide as supreme intellectuals. It proves the truth of 1 Corinthians 1:25: "The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." Here are five things ignorant, rebellious men need to know about the "Unknown God."

God is the Creator. Verse 24a: He "made the world and all things in it." In Paul's day and ours, the truth makes no room for men's opinions regarding origins.

God is the Ruler. Verse 24b: "He is Lord of heaven and earth [and] does not dwell in temples made with hands." It logically follows that if God is the Creator, He is also the rightful Ruler of what He created. And if He is Creator and Ruler, He doesn't live in what His creatures have made.

God is the Giver. Verse 25: "He [is not] served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things." Far from needing anything from men, the Creator "causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45).

God is the Controller. Verse 26: "He made from one man every nation of mankind ... having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation." That statement was a blow to the national pride of the Greeks, who scornfully referred to non-Greeks as "barbarians." Nonetheless, God controls the affairs and destinies of men and nations.

God is the Revealer. Verses 27-29: Men should "seek God...He is not far from each one of us...Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like [anything] formed by the art and thought of man." God, by creating, ruling, giving, and controlling all things, has clearly revealed Himself in what He has made--men are truly without excuse (Rom. 1:20).

Third, tell them what God says (vv. 30-31). Paul's evangelism method ends with a simple, powerful point: tell them to repent or be judged. In the past, God was patient. But a day is coming when He will judge the world through Jesus Christ. God gave sufficient proof of the truth of His Word in the resurrection of His Son--He holds all men accountable to that evidence. His grace in the past and His wrath in the future require repentance in the present. As Paul said elsewhere, "Now is 'the acceptable time,' behold, now is 'the day of salvation'" (2 Cor. 6:2). That message isn't popular today, but then again, it has never been popular. "Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer...so Paul went out of their midst" (v. 32-33).

I mentioned earlier that Paul's method was *effective*, and it is. Look at verse 34: "But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them." It was effective to save those whom God chose to save. Paul was faithful to proclaim the truth. He left the results to God.

From Athens to Los Angeles, first century to twenty-first century and everywhere in between, repentance may not be popular, but it's still the gospel. Teach this post-Christian culture about God and then command repentance. That's the only message we have; without it, no one would be saved.

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