

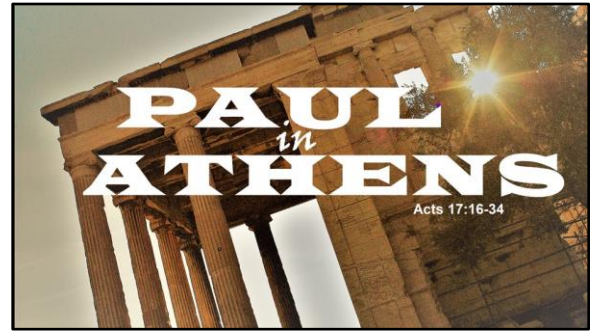
ACTSFACTS

C@G Supplementary Study Notes for ACTS

Message #41

“PAUL IN ATHENS”

(Acts 17:16-34)



In Acts 17 we see Paul active in three distinctly different mission situations.

Firstly, Paul and his companions are in Thessalonica (17:1-9) where Paul’s required strategy is to “reason with” the Jews and others from the Scriptures. They were obviously hard to convince.

Secondly, after escaping from the rioting mob in Thessalonica, Paul and Silas went to Berea. Here, the Berean Jews were very open and received Paul’s message eagerly (17:10-15). Luke describes them as being “noble in character” because they also studied the Scriptures to make sure that Paul was preaching the truth. Again, Paul had to make a hasty exit from Berea and was escorted down to Athens.



And so, here in Athens, Paul had his **third** different opportunity of outreach.

Athens had been the centre of the world in the centuries before Paul arrived. Art, architecture, philosophy, culture and decadence had all characterized this influential city. By the time Paul arrived it was a mere shadow of its former glory, but was still regarded as a centre for religious and philosophical debate and opinion.

Paul, whilst waiting for Silas and Timothy to re-join him from Berea, took the opportunity to wander around and acquaint himself with this new city.

Read Acts 17:16-34.

What caught Paul’s attention immediately in Athens? What did he feel about what he saw?

What is your definition of an “idol”?

Idols are not limited to primitive societies: there are many sophisticated idols too!

An idol is a “God substitute”. Any person or thing that occupies the place that God should occupy is an idol. Covetousness is idolatry. Ideologies can be idols. So can fame, wealth and power, sex, food, alcohol & drugs. people can be idols – parents, spouse, children, and friends. The possibilities for idolatry can extend to work, recreation, television and possessions. Even church, religion and Christian service can be idolized.

Paul was deeply pained by what he saw in the idolatrous city of Athens. But this time in Athens was not one of negativity and defeat....quite the contrary. In this passage we see that Paul has given us a marvellous example to follow.

We see Paul adopt a “two-pronged” strategy here in Athens...first, he goes (as usual) to the synagogue, and he also goes to the “marketplace”. Paul is a man for all audiences!

Of course, when you engage with people outside of the Christian faith, you are likely to encounter people with vastly different, and conflicting, opinions and worldviews....just like Paul!

Luke mentions that Paul debated with two different groups, the Epicureans and the Stoics.

Epicureans thought that the gods didn’t intervene in the world, they were distant and disinterested. Life was a matter of chance, and it was important to find pleasure where you could.

Stoics, meanwhile, said that the world was controlled by fate: you weren't ultimately responsible for your own actions, and you just had to accept suffering!

Both of these philosophies stood in contrast with Paul's message of a personal God who sent a personal Saviour who could not be defeated by death!

How many different religious and philosophical viewpoints can you think of in your community?

Have you ever engaged with someone with a different religious viewpoint than you? How did it go?

Acts 17:19-20 - After Paul's initial interaction with the philosophers in the marketplace, they brought Paul to the Areopagus (Mars Hill). Whilst some had already ridiculed Paul, others were interested in finding out about the new things he was teaching. Paul accepted their invitation to speak and stood in the midst of the Areopagus and started to share.

Acts 17:22-32

This is a significant preaching opportunity for Paul and his address is different from his earlier sermons in other places, which drew largely from the Old Testament for their material (cf. 13:16-41).

How would you summarize Paul's address? What are the main points he makes?

In 17:23 Paul speaks of the alter dedicated "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD". He uses this as an opportunity to tell his listeners about the God who can be known! And he also quoted from the Greek writer, Aratus, and uses it as a point of contact (even though he does not agree with the philosophical system Aratus advocated. These are examples of **contextual preaching**. That simply means being aware of the cultural context you are in and presenting your message in such a way as the listeners will understand and, hopefully, respond. Paul's preaching in Athens is a classic example of contextualized preaching. It is not watering down the gospel, but it is presenting it in a way that opens up the lines of communication.

Have you ever had an opportunity of sharing the gospel message in a "contextualized" way? Share.

Because we live in a very secularized society where there is a very limited (and distorted) knowledge of Scripture, being able to present the gospel in a contextualized way is very important. But it demands that we know and understand the culture of where we are. Of course, we must be careful that we do not "water down" or change the gospel message. True doctrine must be packaged wisely.

In what ways are you listening to the "poets" and "prophets" of your culture, so that you are best able to explain the gospel in a way that is clear and compelling to those around you?

What different responses to Paul's message do you see throughout this passage?

Compare and contrast the responses to Paul's message about Jesus to the responses you see today.

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

Read Acts 17:30-31 (in different versions, if possible). What do you think Paul is saying here? How does this relate to Romans 1:18-32, or do you think it has a different meaning?

PRAYER: Pray that God will enable you to share the truth of the gospel in ways that are clear and understandable to those you share with, and still faithful to the integrity of the gospel message.