

The Church That Reached the World—Athens: Evangelism through Sensitive Proclamation (Acts 17:16-34) **By Bob Young**

[This sermon was originally part of a summer series focused on Acts. I was assigned the text about Paul's visit to Athens.]

Introduction

Athens, and the section of Acts in chapters 14-19 show us that Christianity in the first century had the ability to grow in the cities, and that it had the ability to grow among the unchurched and the pagans. It grew in both of these cases through sensitive proclamation, which I suppose we can call great proclamation.

Wonderful sermon—raised many questions in Biblical study circles through the years. In some ways is a sample of proclamation, but considering proclamation throughout the book of Acts, this is a different kind of sermon. In Acts 2, Acts 3, Acts 7, Acts 13, large Jewish audience and those with Jewish backgrounds. In Acts 13 we see a shift. Need to briefly trace that shift since we large skipped from Acts 11 to Acts 17.

The Acts Approach

[Jim Petersen, Living Proof--Sharing the Gospel Naturally (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1989), 73-75.]

In the early chapters of Acts, the gospel was preached primarily to prepared people. As late as Acts 13, Paul in Pisidian Antioch is addressing Jews, and God-fearing, God-worshiping Gentiles. The Jews on the day of Pentecost were prepared by heritage. They readily responded to the proclamation of the gospel. They had a 1500-year religious heritage. They were prepared. Others converted in the early chapters of Acts were also prepared--Gentiles who were either Jewish proselytes or God-fearers. In one sense, the eunuch is the first Gentile convert, but we do not call him that because he was a Jewish proselyte. Although he was Gentile by birth, he was Jewish by religion. Cornelius was a Gentile, devout and God-fearing. For half of the book of Acts, responses were numerous. We read of 3000 on the first day. The 5000 a few weeks later numbered only the men. The gospel was being preached to people with a spiritual interest and heritage. Acts continually announces numbers--a great company, the church increased.

In the second half of the book of Acts, something changes. After Paul turns to the Gentiles (Acts 13:47-48), he continues to go first to the synagogue, but the results are never again the same. He is stoned and left for dead. Conflict with Judaism intensifies. When Paul arrives in Philippi in Acts 16, there is no synagogue so he and Silas go to a place of prayer. Confronting the secular side of society lands them in prison. The jailor is converted with his house, but the results were apparently meager. In Thessalonica in the synagogue, the message is accepted by some of the women and God-fearing Gentiles, but Paul is soon run out of town. The Thessalonian Jews also run Paul out of Berea, although there appears to be some increased receptivity. In Athens, we have a message recorded to a pagan crowd. The content of the message is obviously different. Paul is philosophical, he quotes other sources in addressing the crowd. He begins with the person of God, then speaks of Jesus and the resurrection. The immediate results were almost non-existent according to Scripture. Is Paul a worse speaker than Peter was on Pentecost? Is the Spirit no longer present? What is the difference?

The difference was in the preparation of the audience. When the gospel is proclaimed to people with a religious heritage, results are obvious. When the gospel is proclaimed to the unchurched of the first century, results are considerably less.

Looking at Acts 13

This chapter is a turning point in the book of Acts, so let us review: ascension, waiting, selection of Matthias, day of Pentecost--3000 Jews, number of disciples is 5000, problems in church--Acts 5,6,7, Stephen, 6:7-- priests obedient to faith. Then the church is scattered--8:4; eunuch is first foreigner convert, a Gentile but Jewish by religion, a proselyte. In Acts 10, Cornelius becomes a Christian, Peter explains action in chapter 11, especially note 11:19.

By Acts 13, church is ready to take gospel to Asia Minor, read of first journey of Paul, come to our text, want to see the significance of this turning point. In 13:16, Paul addresses Israel, Gentiles who worship God. In v. 26, Israel, God-fearers. Recall this phrase from description of Cornelius in chapter 10. Up to this time, converts were all pretty much alike. But after rejection in Pisidian Antioch, when Jews rejected message, jealousy (note v. 46), then turn to Gentiles, to pagans. Going beyond the God-fearers, not only to proselytes to Judaism, but to pagan Gentiles.

The Church Grew through Sensitive Proclamation in the Cities

Urbanization is one of the great facts of our world. More than ½ of our world's population live in urban centers. How will we as a church with rural roots reach into the cities of our world?

Urbanization is a great challenge for the church, and no congregation, regardless of where it exists geographically, can ignore this challenge if mission is a part of our heart.

Sensitive proclamation in the cities requires incarnational involvement.

Here are major cities of the first century Graeco-Roman world. Such cities were then and are now significant in the spread of the gospel. How did the gospel go to such cities?

A. Philippi—Acts 16

Three people, not noteworthy in personal background or influence, show God uniting people of very different kinds in the Philippian church. Cities give wonderful opportunity for showing true nature of the universal church without distinctions. Is this church with which Paul shared such a special relationship one of God's unique masterpieces? See the unifying power of the gospel. Where in the NT is a more disparate group of converts than these three? They are different--national/ethnic origins; social backgrounds and status; psychological needs; economic status. They are the same--needing guidance/salvation.

B. Athens—Acts 17

Intellectual center, philosophies, religions, educational center, students, knowing, intelligent persons, international flavor, the younger intelligentsia is drawn as to a magnet. Encounter between the gospel and culture is difficult, but religion must have a voice in the public arena, and not be delegated to the private world of the believers. What does Christianity say to modern, educated people, to those in universities, etc.?

C. Corinth—Acts 18

Commercial center, emporium, immorality, gospel can radiate from such centers. Consider Paul's approach: **(1)** Go to those who accept message most readily (evangelize Jews, visit synagogue, etc.). **(2)** Go to the Gentiles. The success of that approach is seen here. (18:6-7; 19:9). **(3)** In both cities, Paul's approach is vindicated with responses (18:8; 19:10). **(4)** God's presence is the power for this proclamation (18:9-10; 19:10). **(5)** Opposition from Roman authorities questions legitimacy of gospel (18:12ff; 19:35ff).

D. Ephesus—Acts 19

Commercial center, market of Asia Minor (Barclay), also a religious center, imperial cult, Diana/Artemis; superstitions, occult, educational center, schools (Tyrannus). Again consider Paul's approach: **(1)** Go first to those who accept message most readily (evangelize Jews, visit synagogue, etc.). **(2)** Go to the Gentiles. The success of that approach is seen here. (18:6-7; 19:9). **(3)** In this text, Paul's approach is vindicated with responses (18:8; 19:10). **(4)** God's presence is the power for this proclamation (18:9-10; 19:10). **(5)** Opposition from Roman authorities questions legitimacy of gospel (18:12ff; 19:35ff)

E. What about our cities?

Intellectual, governmental, educational, commercial center, religious centers; superstitions, occult, schools, contemporary, post-modern world. What should be our process? **(1)** Go to those accepting the message most readily (church, religious folks). **(2)** There will be rejection. **(3)** Go to the Gentiles (Base of operations: house groups, public arena teaching). **(4)** Expect responses; establish church. Begin church meetings. **(5)** God's presence is power of proclamation: church, small groups (not operations base), unrelated activities; more becoming part of church, fellowship, worship. **(6)** Expect challenges/opposition questioning legitimacy.

The Challenges of Sensitive Proclamation in the City

The city challenges us in its priorities. The Christian message challenges the hearer at every level—at the highest intellectual level; at all strata of society, at formally educated and less educated; successful; commercial interests, religiously, educationally....

The city challenges the hearts of Christians with its lostness. Are we genuinely committed to the spread of the gospel? Illus: Tegucigalpa. How will we ever work through this city--Mexico City, the great urban areas of our nations and world?

The city must touch our hearts with the immorality and aimlessness of the people. We must sense the distress as Jesus did in Matthew 9: people helpless, hopeless, homeless, hapless—sheep without a shepherd, following the siren songs of our day.

In our day, we begin with the religious, but we must move beyond that sphere. In the churches, we can read Scripture, offer prayer, reach God-fearers, and attract the uncommitted. But we must sensitively proclaim the gospel. We must not limit evangelism to the religious. We are neglecting the non-religious. We must reach religious people in religious buildings, and secular people in secular settings: homes, lecture halls, educational institutions, public arenas and forums, in neutral and public settings. (Campbell and his national debates)

How to Sensitively Proclaim in the City

A. THE CLAIM OF CHRISTIANITY: Good News

While there may be common ground between Scripture and other knowledge, the ultimate call is the repentance, and none can claim the Christ while rejecting the call. Ultimately, gospel preaching must call for repentance, from all, despite the fact that some will reject the call. The contemporary culture is inadequate, a call to repentance issues from that cultural inadequacy of the world around us. This is a reasoned, argued, persuasive claim (18:4,13; 19:8,9).

B. CONVINCING--Proclamation

The purpose of the proclamation is clear—to convince, to make plain, to persuade. How people respond matters because we are people who love. This is not a take it or leave it matter. Arguments are no substitute for God's work through God's Spirit. And trust in the HS is no substitute for reasoned argumentation. These are not opposing alternatives. The HS is of truth, and he brings people to faith not in spite of the evidence but because of the evidence. We want a viable voice, making clear the evidence and allowing God to work in his spiritual realm.

C. CONVERTING—Process/Persuasion

The proclamation process changes us. Conversion means to change. Certainly we change our minds, our commitments, our priorities. But that we would call the commitment to Christ conversion is most clearly seen in the expectation of changed lives. Rom. 12:1-2.

D. Conclusion

I fear a contrast between our evangelistic efforts and fervor and Paul's shows the shallowness of our day. We are lackadaisical, apathetic, lethargic in the matter of the multitudes of our world. Our evangelism is too church-centered (competing churches, inviting people to church), and we must discover again the gospel in our homes and in our marketplaces. Much evangelism in our world suffers either from too much HS or too little HS. While following Jesus is an emotional experience, this is a reasoned, persuasive decision we make. We must escape superficiality and find seriousness.

Principles for Preaching in the Post-modern Culture

1. Preaching in the post-modern culture must clearly speak of the evidences of the God who does great things (the healing story, parallels in our own day).

2. Preaching in the post-modern world proceeds in unlikely places with little hope for resounding success because hearts are touched for Christ. Note Paul's distress, thus our understanding of why he would proceed in such unlikely circumstances, why he would proclaim Christ in this unlikely place.
3. Preaching in the post-modern world must be careful not to exalt or reward the messengers.
4. Preaching in the post-modern world seeks common beginning points. The first part of the speech is argument understandable to the Stoics, and the statements about God would be acceptable, even though Paul and the Stoics may have had different meanings attached. This is a sermon seeking common ground as a beginning point.
5. Preaching in the post-modern world must address the realities of the contemporary culture. What does Christianity say to modern, educated people, to those in universities, etc.? This sermon can speak knowledgeably of the contemporary culture, and issue a call to repentance out of that cultural inadequacy. Our culture is on a religious quest, but the search continues to come up empty. Encounter between the gospel and culture is increasingly difficult, but somehow religion must have a voice in the public arena, and not be delegated exclusively to the private world of the believers (Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks).
6. Preaching in the post-modern world must not compromise God's truth. The second part of the speech outlines the message which the philosophers did not accept. The call the repentance may have been politely rejected, but the claim of resurrection was the climactic point of disagreement. The unique claims of Christianity must be focused.
7. Preaching in the post-modern world must be prepared for responses of apathy or rejection. The response to this sermon is telling: no uproar, no hostility, no mass conversion, a meager result in an educated area. Willimon speaks of the power of proclamation and its limits. Faithful preaching can be rejected. Still there are honest seekers who will respond. The summons of the gospel is to all--we must not be selective prematurely in determining who will and will not hear.

The Church Grew through Sensitive Proclamation to the Pagans and Unchurched

Acts 14:8-20 foreshadows Acts 17:16-34, sermons designed to take the gospel to the non-Christian first century world. Parallel in our day is this: no church is going to reach the world with proclamation until that proclamation speaks to the non-Christian, post-modern world in which we live. We must see this new challenge.

In Acts 14 we have the second summary of a Pauline sermon. This sermon is worthy of intense study by itself. This context and sermon have several parallels with the earlier 3:1ff passage (cf. 3:1ff with 14:8ff). This provides a "Peter to Paul" transition that was likely clearer to Luke's readers than it is to us today. In Acts 17, we have an account of Paul's sermon to the philosophers in Athens.

In both of these sermons we have only brief abstracts. We mention them together, because their common concern, and thus the subject for us in this sermon, is the question how one can approach religiously illiterate pagans and unchurched persons. We should learn from Paul's cultural flexibility--while the general substance of his message was unvaried, the approach, emphasis, focus was fashioned for his hearers. We have here a suggestion about how to begin in our communication with the world of unbelievers. This material has great potential for instructing persons with roots in the contemporary post-modern cultural as well as Christians (with those same roots, but perhaps more desirous of escaping such world views) in what it means to think Christianly, and in thinking about the way in which the message of Jesus might be spread abroad.

The Sermon

The truth--God is worthy of worship because of who he is, and those who proclaim Him are only human messengers. We proclaim the living and true God.

A. He is Creator of the Universe (24)

This is very unlike the Epicurean emphasis on a chance combination of atoms or the pantheism of the Stoics. This is a personal Creator God, a personal Lord. Such a God, overseeing all of his creation, could never live in a

shrine built by human endeavors. One can never localize or limit or imprison this God. He created us, we did not create him, and we cannot create him now to our liking.

B. He is Sustainer of Life (25)

The one who can sustain life does not need to be sustained. He supplies our need, and does not need what we can supply. One can never tame, domesticate, or box in God. God is not to be reduced to any level below who he is; such is a ridiculous reversal of roles. We depend on God; he does not depend on us.

C. He is Ruler of all nations (26ff)

God is in control, 14:17. The world is under his control, and his purpose is that his human creation might seek him, reach for him, and find him. Seeking is natural, the alienation of sin causes us to grope, but such should not be blamed on God. He is not distant or unknowable. He is not far away. We are distanced, not He. If it were not for the separation of sin, he would be readily accessible, as Epimenides the 6th c. BC poet has observed: In him we live and move and have our being.

D. He is the Origin/Father of humanity (28)

This quotation is from Aratus, 3rd c. Stoic author, from Cilicia. Such secular quotes are interesting. The church today has become critical of such secular wisdom, but here is Paul proving his points. There are glimmerings of truth, insights from general revelation, found in non-Christian authors.

The point here seems to be that we are alive, as he is alive. Not like gold or silver which are lifeless. This is a clear strike against idolatry. Idolatry is inexcusable.

E. He is Judge (31)

The sermon ends where it began--with human ignorance. God has given testimony (14:17). Certain judgment is coming--repentance is demanded. This judgment will be universal (the world), righteous, definite. God committed judgment to the Son (Jn. 5:27), and God gives public proof of this by raising him from the dead. The resurrection vindicates Jesus, declares him Lord and Judge. Nations created from the first Adam will be judged by the last Adam.

Conclusion

Think we me about what we have done this evening:

- We surveyed the Acts approach to proclamation and evangelism, specifically looking at Acts 13 while reviewing larger sections of Acts.
- We examined the sensitive proclamation in the first-century cities as a prelude to thinking about the sermon in Athens in Acts 17, looking specifically at Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, and Ephesus as background for great proclamation in our cities.
- We treated some of the challenges of proclamation in the cities.
- We gave a "how to" list of three steps for proclamation in the cities.
- We shared seven principles for preaching in the post-modern culture.
- Then we turned to the task of proclamation to the pagans and unchurched, the parallel task to what we have outlined in our text.
- We analyzed the Acts 17 sermon at the Areopagus as an example of sensitive proclamation.

The mention of resurrection brings the sermon to an end. What can we learn? The Christian message should challenge us at the highest intellectual level. While there may be common ground between Scripture and other knowledge, the ultimate call is to repentance, and none can claim the Christ while rejecting his call. Ultimately, gospel preaching must call for repentance from all, despite the fact that some will reject the call as too hard (cf. John 6).

Nonetheless, there are results. Some responded to the summons or repent. This is basic divine truth. God is God. There is none other. In a Christian sermon, we would ask "What will you do with Jesus?" "What will you do with God?" Wrestle with God, let God be God, do not seek to diminish him, tame him, box him, belittle him.