

Christians in a Secular Culture

Our second Scripture reading is Acts 17:16-34, where we find Paul on his second missionary venture. Because of the turmoil caused by his preaching, Paul was forced to flee to the city of Athens, which was only a shadow of its former self. Athens was at the height of its glory in the fifth and fourth centuries before Christ, when it was the cultural center of the civilized world and the home of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. But even though it was at the time of Paul's visit beyond its glory years, Athens was still associated with highest culture and sophistication and was not the kind of city that would be the most likely for a new church plant! But what Paul thought and did in Athens is instructive for us as followers of Jesus who also find ourselves living in the midst of an increasingly secular culture.

Follow as I read **Acts 17:16-34**.

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, 'What does this babbler want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.' (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) ¹⁹ So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?' ²⁰ It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.' ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring." ²⁹ Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the

dead.’³² *When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’*³³ *At that point Paul left them.*³⁴ *But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.*

In our text for today, author Luke presents Paul and his speech in Athens as “the high peak in his missionary career.” What is instructive for us is the fact that Paul did his best work in the most unlikely places. Athens was symbolic of the paganism and idolatry that dominated the ancient world. Because of its high culture and intellectual sophistication it was also the most difficult to penetrate with the message of Jesus Christ. Here is one of several “how much more argument” in Acts. If the witness for Jesus and his saving message can succeed in first century Athens, how much more can the message of Jesus and his witnesses succeed in 21st Century Madison, including your own circle of influence!

We live in a culture that is post-Christian. I thought after my nine years in Belgium, returning to the U.S. would mean coming home to a less secular environment. Yet, from the appearance of the absence of church-goers in my neighborhood here in Madison, there seems little difference in the secularity of the two nations. But we shouldn't be surprised by our difference from the culture. We *are* different by calling and commitment. *The Message* paraphrase of 1 Peter 2:9-12 highlights our difference from the culture around us:

“But you are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God's instruments to do his work and speak out for him, to tell others of the night-and-day difference he made for you—from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted.

“Friends, this world is not your home, so don't make yourselves cozy in it. Don't indulge your ego at the expense of your soul. Live an exemplary life among the natives so that your actions will refute their prejudices. Then they'll be won over to God's side and be there to join in the celebration when he arrives.”

We are called to be Christ's unique people in a secular culture. The King James translation of 1611 says in 1 Peter 2:9 that we are God's “peculiar people,” which is not a flattering description, given how we now understand the word “peculiar.” But as part of the Kingdom of God we are called to stand out from the rest of the culture, which indeed may make us seem very peculiar to people in the larger culture. Groups like the Amish people in North America have focused this difference on outward appearances and non-conformity with modern dress, conveniences and appliances. They appear peculiar in a 19th Century sort of way. But our difference from others in the school, workplace and community is not to be based on outward appearances or whether or not we drive cars and use electrical appliances, although our Christian calling will dictate modesty and restraint. Rather, our difference from the secular culture around us will be of the

deeper kind that characterized the great apostle-missionary Paul. This is the kind of difference that will honor God and that God also will honor.

As Christians in a secular world, we will **see with a different perspective**. Our text tells us that as he walked through the city of Athens, Paul was “greatly distressed” by what he saw—a city that was “full of idols” (v. 16). As William Barclay said, in Athens “it was easier to meet a god than a man.” Paul was not in Athens as a sightseer, but as an evangelist. As Christ-followers in our secular culture, we are not to overlook people and their needs and worldview as a passing tourist would do; but we are to see with a different perspective.

And when we do we will be more than distressed. The NIV translation says that Paul was “greatly distressed” by what he saw, but one New Testament scholar says this is a weak translation. The Greek word is transliterated “paroxysm,” which means “a sudden violent emotion.” Paul was deeply moved, just as was Jesus, who wept over the city of Jerusalem, realizing the judgment that awaited the unrepentant and oblivious (Lk. 19:41). No doubt Paul was angry over the rampant idolatry because the one true living God was being overlooked and obfuscated by these dead, inanimate idols, and Satan had these people in the grips of spiritual darkness, a darkness that could be felt (Ex. 10:21).

Paul was more than distressed—he was angry with a broken heart. He wasn’t angry with the people but rather with the devil, who had darkened minds and hearts. He yearned with the love and compassion of Jesus that these people might turn from darkness to the light of the truth in Jesus Christ. He was angry with sin and Satan but not with the people. Paul was moved with compassion and sought to win the lost. He always spoke with genuine respect and love for the people and with a yearning for them to come to the knowledge of God’s saving truth.

We are not yet prepared to be God’s faithful witnesses in this secular culture until we begin to see people around us as immortal souls who are destined either for a glorious eternity with Jesus or as dupes of Satan, destined for an eternity of suffering and separation from God. “It is a serious thing,” writes [C.S. Lewis](#), “to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as now you meet, if at all, only in a nightmare...There are no ordinary people,” says Lewis. If we are to live as we should in this culture, we need to see the worth of people.

As deeply distressed as he was, Paul was not discouraged. He understood that he was in Athens, not by accident or as a passing tourist, but as God’s witness and representative of the saving message of Jesus. He believed he was there by divine appointment and thus he determined to join God in his mission in the pagan, ungodly city of Athens. He believed that although Athens was ungodly,

God himself was there in the city, in the synagogue, where there were God-fearing seekers, but also in the Agora market, the place where people assembled to shop and to talk. There he joined God by boldly, freely speaking the message of Jesus with anyone who would listen, and surprisingly, there were people who were eager to listen. Paul found God at work in an unexpected place.

Paul was more than distressed by the pagan culture but he never was discouraged or overwhelmed by the spiritual forces he faced. He put on the armor of God, and he sensed the prayer support of others and knew he was more than a conqueror through Christ Jesus (Eph. 6:10-20; Rom. 8:37). He knew he was not on mission for Jesus but was on mission *with* Jesus (Matt. 28:20). Paul knew that “a great door for effective work” and great opposition from the world were often simultaneous occurrences (1 Cor. 16:9).

His calling was to be faithful and he could entirely trust God to enable him for the task at hand, which meant he was to **speak with a different message**. When we are truly excited about the message of Jesus we should be like Paul and Peter and John, who said to the authorities who tried to silence them, “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). For us to make a difference in our secular culture, we too must have zeal to share the message, being convinced that what we know is what our “world” needs to hear. Zeal for God’s kingdom and glory and Jesus-like compassion for the lost, and living in step with the Holy Spirit will give us the boldness we need to speak up for him at every opportunity.

Then we will speak the message about him with relevance. Paul began his message by acknowledging that they were deeply religious, and then cited their many objects of worship and used one particular altar as his main point of connection: the altar with the inscription, “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD” (v. 23). Obviously, this altar was erected to make sure all the ground was covered, in case they had omitted a god from their vast array of gods who would be important for meeting their needs. Holding up that image before them Paul then went on to introduce the God who was known to them.

We as witnesses for Jesus in this culture need to be able to speak in the life language of the people. We need to find things with which we can agree and things about which we can affirm and compliment them. We cannot come at people in this culture with a condescending air of superiority, but must meet them on their level with all due humility and respect that allows them the freedom and dignity to respect our message (1 Pet. 3:15). Once Paul made a connection and gained a hearing from his audience, he was ready to share the relevance of his message with them. His purpose was to present the message about this “unknown God,” whom Paul knew to be the Triune God of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The message of Paul finds its apex in the resurrection of Jesus. This was a strange word to these pagans, for whom a bodily resurrection was the farthest

concept from their way of thinking. To them, the body was inherently evil and unworthy of immortality. And some of these pagans thought that by resurrection Paul was speaking of another god to add to their assortment of gods. Yet, the resurrection of Jesus signaled the inauguration of the age to come and the arrival of his kingdom that would find its consummation in the bodily resurrection of his people, who will live forever in his “being-redeemed” heaven and earth.”

The witness that Paul gave in Athens is an example to us in our secular culture. We too must seek to understand and speak the language of the people. And we must find a place of meeting, and the point of their felt needs, and boldly declare that Christ is the answer to whatever the need—for temporal provision, wisdom, strength and grace for living and hope for the life to come. We must be familiar with the story of salvation and the way those outside of God’s spiritual family can become children of God.

And in his task, Paul was called also to **succeed in a different way**. No doubt many continued to see Paul as a drifter who happened to wander into Athens as an itinerate “babbling,” someone who was always delving into the novel and untested. To their way of thinking, Paul was a loser who would be forgotten soon after his departure. He was invited to speak to the Areopagus Council more as a curiosity, deserving to be sneered at and scorned (v. 32). The members of this council were professionals at reviewing all the latest philosophical fads and ideas (v. 21). But for others, namely a man named Dionysius, a member of this august Areopagus Court, and a woman named Damaris and “a number of others,” Paul made sense (v. 34). His message was something that rang true. They had come to believe on Jesus and now had begun a personal relationship with him. Paul rightly measured success by his faithfulness to give witness to Jesus.

Paul left the city of Athens a different place than it was before he arrived. That’s the prayer I have for my life and work in this place—that God will use me to make a difference in this secular, lost culture. I too need to see this culture differently, to see it as one that is desperately in need of the hope that we have in Christ Jesus. I must live in the spirit of prayerful dependence on God to open the eyes of the spiritually blind and to let the light and love of Christ be seen in me and his truth be heard from me. I must be ready at all times to share the message of Jesus with respect and deep compassion.