

*This character study / commentary into Apostle Paul is based mostly on Charles Swindoll's "Great Lives in God's Word" series on Paul and FF Bruce's "Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free." Main source materials are based on contents in these books unless otherwise noted.

Sunday June 18, 2023

Lesson 10: The Art of Evangelism

Reference: Acts 17

When we last saw Paul, he spent many days in the city of Philippi, evangelizing to many Greek cultured audience members. He had switched his approach from being a preacher or teacher to being an evangelist. Three of his evangelistic success stories include a wealthy business woman, a demon-possessed slave, and a Roman guard. However, he wore out his welcome in the city after he cast the demon from the slave girl.

This next portion of Paul's journey can probably be summarized as evangelism in three cities, in three synagogues, with three types of audiences – the uncivilized, the noble, and the confused.

Ministry in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-8)

Moving on from Philippi, Paul heads towards Thessalonica, which at the time was the capital for one of the four provinces of Macedonia. Dr. Luke changed the pronoun here to the third person again, indicating that he stayed in Philippi and did not join Paul. In fact, Luke will not see Paul again until they meet up later in Paul's third missionary journey (Acts 20:2,6). Luke's description of the cities Paul passed through on his way to Thessalonica infers that Paul likely took a Roman highway called the *Via Egnatia*, which runs basically from the edge of Bithynia (cf Acts 16) to Constantinople. This was one of the road systems that the Romans built in the region which gave birth to the phrase "all roads lead to Rome." The inclusion of these cities that Paul *passed through* is meant to communicate the length of the journey. Basically, it took Paul 3 days to travel from Philippi to Thessalonica. The total distance is approximately 100 miles.

Thessalonica was a city founded in 315 BC by one of Alexander the Great's generals (Cassander). Like other cities in the ANE world, the city had an array of cults, to include the cult of worshipping Roman emperors. History shows that the city itself sided with Octavian against Marc Antony in the great battle for control of Rome, and was rewarded with various freedoms, to include freedom from taxes and the freedom to appoint their own magistrates (city officials).

Luke indicated that a synagogue exists in the city and that's where Paul went, following his traditional approach. However, rather than preaching or teaching, Paul reasoned with the Jews (17:2); meaning that he had conversations in attempt to persuade (17:4). However, the Jews in the Synagogue who were not persuaded became jealous of the attention Paul was receiving, as they sought whatever means necessary – to include recruiting wicked men – to rid the whole city of Paul and Silas (17:5). The city officials, being part of the locals and thus, lacked objectivity, went along with the plan.

Paul and Silas was evidently staying in Jason's house. Little is known of Jason other than he is a believer, and he housed the two apostles. When the crowd arrived at Jason's house, Paul and Silas was evidently not there, so they made Jason post bond for Paul, meaning that an arrest warrant had been issued for Paul. This will become relevant in Paul's next stop.

Ministry in Berea (Acts 17:10-15)

Luke documents that Paul and Silas was snuck way to Berea in the middle of the night. Berea sits approximately 45 miles from Thessalonica, and is not along the *Via Egnatia* route. While in Berea, Paul – again – looked for and visited a Jewish Synagogue. Luke made the effort to note that the Jews in Berea were notably different than those in Thessalonica, in that they were of more noble character (17:11). Paul's evangelistic effort here also bore fruit as many were persuaded by his message (17:12).

Paul's ministry in Berea had to be cut short when the Jews in Thessalonica learned of his whereabouts. Some went to Berea to agitate the crowds, and also (possibly) to try to bring Paul back to Thessalonica for trial. Sensing that this cycle will repeat itself wherever Paul goes in the region, a plan was conceived where Silas and Timothy will stay in Berea – leading the troublemaking Jews to believe that Paul is still in the city as well – as other believers escorted Paul to Athens by way of the sea (17:14). After arriving in Athens, Paul then sent a message back with his escorts for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible (17:15).

Ministry in Athens (Acts 17:16-34)

While waiting for Timothy and Silas, Paul spent some time touring the city, and what he saw greatly distressed him (17:16). Athens in Paul's time was a city full of idols and – by extension – full of cultures related to those idols. The residents of the city were highly superstitious, being very concerned about upsetting various gods and deities that they make sure to have a statue honoring all the possible gods. For fear that they may have omitted certain gods due to ignorance, they've also created a statue honoring any gods that they may not know about (17:23). In effect, the city residents lived in fear of various "unknowns" that manifest itself behind various false deities shaped into idols.

Luke informs us that Paul reasoned with the people both in the synagogue and in the marketplace about their ignorance. On one of these encounters, his reasoning caught the attention of two schools of philosophers – the Epicureans and the Stoics. The Epicureans basically do not believe in any deities, that all of reality is material; everything boils down to atoms, that life begins when atoms come together, and ends when they fall apart. There is no afterlife. The Stoics also believe that everything boils down to atoms, however they also believe reality transcends beyond the material; that there is something beyond death. As it relates to religion, The Stoics are effectively pantheist – god is everything, and everything is god. The Epicureans are effectively atheist – if god exist, he exists apart from humans (like another race) and does not relate to humans in any way. Paul's message intrigued these two schools of philosophers that they invited him to debate in the Aeropagus (17:19-20).

In Paul's time, the Aeropagus (aka Mars Hill) was the place where the governing council would meet to discuss matters of concern. Outside of that usage, the place also seems to be where various schools of philosophers gather to debate philosophy (17:21). This incident fits the latter occasion. Paul was asked to present his "views" and he used it to present the Gospel. Responses to his message was mixed, but it did bore fruit and led some to become believers (17:34).

Analysis – Acts 17:1-34

The second leg of Paul's journey with the new mission objective begins with Paul losing a member of his team, at least for the time being. Paul's ability to travel over 100 miles in three days after recently being beaten and shackled in Philippi speaks to the physical fitness of his body. His ministry in Thessalonica lasted less than a month due primarily to an uncivilized culture and governance. His ministry in Berea was met with more civility but was also cut short by the uncivilized crowd from Thessalonica. However, the highlight of this second leg of Paul's journey had to be his encounter in Athens, where his audience is the gentile of gentiles.

Paul's message and approach in Athens presents a model for us for how we should evangelize, especially when we are trying to reach a people group who is superstitious and set in their own beliefs. At the root of the superstition in the culture in Athens is the need to understand the afterlife; basically, *what happens when we die?* (17:18). This question is as relevant to the people in Athens in Paul's days, as they are to us today.

Observe Paul's approach to evangelism to this audience, and the way he responds to their requests:

- He first familiarizes himself with the surroundings (17:16-17)
- He then looks for opportunities to speak to them about their curiosity and confusion (superstition and ignorance) (17:18-20)
- He addresses the root of their confusion to catch their attention (17:18)
- Given the opportunity to speak, he starts '*where they are*' in their beliefs (17:22-23)
- He uses '*their familiar*' to introduce to them the unfamiliar ('TO AN UNKNOWN GOD' 17:23)
- He shared the gospel message in plain language that they would understand (17:24-31)
 - Referencing their practice wherever applicable (17:25,27-28)
 - Applying the principles of his message to the needs / confusion of the audience (17:30)
 - Explains the purpose as it relates to the audiences' confusion (17:31)
 - Without mentioning the Mosaic Law (i.e.. no Christian terms)
 - Without mentioning theology (i.e salvation by Grace alone from Acts 15)

In effect, Paul told the audience that they are worshipping various unknowns because they are uncertain about who God is, and also uncertain about the afterlife. He encouraged them to be certain, and also gave them the reason why.

As Christians, we can learn from Paul's actions and recognize that, when evangelizing, especially to those who worships idols of various false deities, the focus has to be on the audience – their needs, their beliefs, especially about the issue of death. The art of evangelism is to find ways to help the lost understand that life is not without purpose from a supernatural perspective (God), and that there is the matter of knowing what happens after we die. In this regard, the following principles applies as it relates to exercising this art:

- **The art of evangelism focuses on the need for certainty** – Paul was speaking to a wide audience of confused people, from those who accepted their confusion as norm and simply dealt with it, to those who promoted more confusion (i.e. philosophers). Confusion coupled with superstition breeds uncertainty. Paul wanted the audience to overcome this uncertainty about who the One True God is, and also about what happens after they die. When we evangelize to an audience that does not know God, we ought to keep it simple and promote the need to be certain about what they believe; especially about God, and about death.
- **The art of evangelism focuses on the audience** – As controversial as this may sound, the Holy Bible is not the first thing we should bring out when we evangelize. Paul did not talk about the Mosaic Law or of the Oral traditions, or quote the Old Testament, or discuss the theology of salvation with this audience. These are not the things that someone who knows nothing about God would care for. To them, the Holy Bible is just another book. Paul spoke to this audience in a language that they would understand. He starts where they are in their belief, and he connects the dots for them to bring them towards the Gospel. To focus on the audience means that we have to know where they are – what they believe – and talk to them starting from that point. Many times, this will require research and knowledge into the backgrounds of their belief – as Paul demonstrated in Athens.
- **The art of evangelism focuses on the ultimate question** – The ultimate question to pose in evangelism is "What happens after you die." This was the challenge to the people in Athens, which led Paul to address it head on. The response – both in Paul's days as will also be today, will always be mixed because people are set in their belief, and the Truth always challenges us to question what we believe. Paul was wise to focus on this issue. In evangelism, somehow, we should aim to bring this topic up and then let the Holy Spirit guide the discussion forward (17:32)

Reflecting Upon the Word

Re-read Acts 17:22-33. This is the passage highlighting Paul's presentation on Mars Hill.

1. The people in Athens crafted many ways to try to describe and honor gods and goddesses because they don't really know who the real god is, or even how to describe him. How did Paul describe the One True God?
2. How do the many schools of philosophers contribute to that society's confusion over deities? Over eternal life? Over matters of faith? (17:28)
3. Meditate on these passages and reconstruct – in your own words – what Paul is actually saying

Reflecting Upon our World

The world that we live in today also promotes a spectrum of idols and deities.

1. How does our world today view the concept of god? How does the world define god(s)? How does the world view death?
2. Who would be the "schools of philosophers" in our world today that may contribute to the various views towards god and/or death?
3. How does Christians today address this world view (i.e.. compared to Paul)?

Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

Reflect on your personal journey, focusing on how God put you in an evangelistic setting

1. Recount the last time God put you in position to tried to evangelize to someone. What was your approach? What tools did you use (i.e.. Evangelcube, Gospel Track)?
2. Evaluate the circle of contacts that God has place around you. For those who are not Christians, what are their backgrounds? How much do you know about their views on God and on death? How would you talk to them about this topic should they one day ask about it?
3. If you should approach you and ask you "What happens after you die", are you prepared to respond? Are you certain of what you believe in?