

Hope Christian Church
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What the World Needs Now

Provoked, Patient, Proclaimers of the Gospel

Scripture: Acts 17:16-34

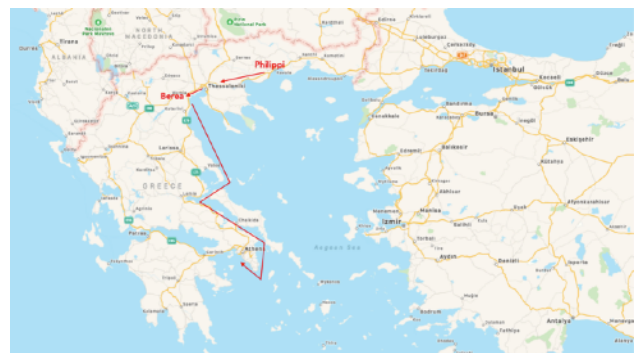
Sermon Series: *The Acts of Jesus Today*

Topic: Evangelism



Introduction

Last week we left Paul in the city of Phillipi. In that city, he had Luke, Silas, and Timothy with him. From Philippi he made a 100 mile journey southwest to Thessalonica. Unlike Phillipi there was a synagogue in



Thessalonica, "as was Paul's custom,"¹ that was the first place he went to proclaim the good news about Jesus. He "*reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving*"² that Jesus is the Christ, that is God's messiah. He was invited back to the synagogue to speak for two additional weeks. Paul stayed in this city for perhaps a month or more after this. Some believed among both Jews and Greeks along with some "leading women"³ in town. However, other Jews grew jealous of Paul and stirred up a mob against him.

In order to protect him, the believers sent Paul and Silas away by night about 50 miles southwest to Berea, which today is called Veria. Upon arriving in Berea, Paul once again first went to the synagogue and began proclaiming Jesus as God's messiah. The Jews here eagerly listened to what Paul said about Jesus. However, after listening to him, they went straight to the Scriptures to see if what Paul was teaching was true and in agreement with God's word. After studying their Bibles many of them became believers in Jesus because Jesus fulfilled the word God has spoken beforehand through this prophets. However, more jealous Jews stirred up the unbelieving crowds against him. Paul was sent away again for his safety. Apparently the animosity was primarily against Paul so Silas and Timothy remained in Berea. Paul traveled by sea alone about 250 miles to the south to the city of **Athens** where he waited for Silas and Timothy to join him.

This is where we pick up our story in the text today; in the city of Athens. Athens had long been a significant city, but when Paul arrived it was in a period of decline.

It was the home of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno, who founded Stoicism, which took its name from the stoa, or colonnade in which he taught.

The city was known for the many pagan temples to the gods and had been named in honor of the goddess Athena. Among the many temples



¹ Acts 17:2.

² Acts 17:2-3.

³ Acts 17:4.

are the **Parthenon**, the temple of Athena, the temple to Zeus, the temple of Erechtheion, and the temple to the goddess Roma.

Along with the many temples are dozens of statues to the gods and goddesses which were worshiped as the gods themselves. So many were there that the Roman author **Petronius** wrote that it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens.⁴ Evidently Paul experienced the truth of this upon his arrival in Athens.



Paul had landed at Athens harbor alone. The plan was that he would wait in Athens for Timothy and Silas to join him.

What do you do when you are alone in the city?

Paul Was Provoked

Paul went for a walk and saw a city “*full of idols.*” What he saw “*provoked*” him.

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was **provoked** within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. Acts 17:16 (ESV)

What Paul saw troubled him greatly. He saw a city full of worshipers who were actively worshiping everything but God. They were worshiping that which was *not* God. They were worshiping stones! This **provoked** his spirit.

The word (παροξύνω *paroxynō*) means “to sharpen, to spur on, to stimulate. The word usually means ‘to stir to anger, to be irritated with, or incensed at.’”⁵ We last saw this word in 15:39 where we were told of the “*sharp*” disagreement that arose between Paul and Barnabas concerning whether or not to bring John Mark along with them. Here Luke uses it again to describe the inward response of Paul to the idolatry of a great city. What Paul witnessed in the city of Athens, the idolatry and futile worship of so-called gods, provoked his spirit within him. He did not observe the vain idol worship that filled the city and remain unmoved. He became emotional at what he saw. He was troubled and moved. He could not remain silent.

⁴ ESV Study Bible note at Acts 17:16.

⁵ Heinrich Seesemann, “Παροξύνω, Παροξυσμός,” ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 857.

Shouldn't All Christians Be Provoked by Idolatry?

Here we see one admirable trait of the Christian. He looks at the world around him and sees it through the eyes of Jesus, and his spirit is provoked. The follower of Jesus not only sees the world, but also attends to it, that is, she pays close attention and considers the direction in which it is headed.

Imagine if the apostle Paul were to arrive this morning at Boston harbor and take a walk through the city. What would he see? What sort of idols does the city of Boston worship? What gods does Boston worship? What would provoke his spirit on that walk?

Would he wander through the financial district and see the massive buildings that have been constructed in which to conduct business? Would he wonder if Boston worships **wealth**?

Would Paul pass by TD Garden and notice any similarity to the ancient Greek temples to the gods? Would he wonder if Boston worships in such a building? Would he be provoked thinking that Boston worships the idol of **sport**?



Would he walk by the many hospitals and medical buildings in Boston and see the towering plazas and medical centers and wonder if the city worships **health** or maybe even doctors?

Would Paul walk across the many university campuses in this city and look at the massive edifices which have been erected in which to teach and learn. Would he look at these buildings and see any similarity with the ancient Greek temples to the gods and would he wonder whether or not this city worships **education**?



Would he make it way past the State House and gaze at its great golden dome and wonder whether or not that too was a temple of worship? Does Boston worship **government**?

Or would he pass by and observe us taking selfies and wonder if we worship **ourselves**?

Stop for a moment and think. Go for a short mental walk through your neighborhood, your town, your city, and even your own house. What do you see? What are the idols around you?

What idols do you see being worshiped?

Does anything provoke you? If not, then you'll be silent. But perhaps if something moves you, then maybe you'll be provoked to act upon what you see.

Paul Was Patient

Paul's spirit was provoked. How would he respond to that inward provocation at the idolatry he saw that filled the city? He responded **patiently**. According to v.17, he did what he normally did, even though he was alone.

So he **reasoned** in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Acts 17:17 (ESV)

Reasoning with someone requires patience. Paul was provoked, but toward reasoning rather than ranting and rage. "The anger of man never produces the righteousness of God" (James 1:20). He went to the synagogue and "*reasoned with the Jews and devout persons*" on the sabbath. "Devout persons" is Luke's way of referring to God-fearing Gentiles. Even though Paul was alone in the city, on the sabbath, he went into the synagogue and **reasoned** with the Jews and pious Gentiles he found there. In other words, he patiently discussed Jesus with them. We can assume he did just as Luke has already recorded for us that he did in every other city. Paul went into the synagogue and began *reasoning* from Scripture that Jesus is the fulfillment of the OT promises concerning messiah. Paul patiently walked them through the many Scriptures that Jesus fulfilled during his life.

He did not yell and scream at them, rather he *reasoned* with them. He did not resort to spiritual arm-twisting, rather he **reasoned** with them. The Greek word is *dialegetō*, which means "to formally discuss, to address, or to give a speech."⁶ In Classical Greek the word meant "to converse."⁷ From this word we have our word 'dialogue.' Paul simply sat down and had a conversation with his fellow Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles. He did this on the sabbath day in the synagogue.

However, Paul did not limit his patient reasoning and engaging with people only to the sabbath. He also went into the **marketplace** (lit. agora) **every day** and spoke with "*whoever happened to be there.*" The gospel of Jesus is not a gospel for one day only. The good news

⁶ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 391.

⁷ Gottlob Schrenk, "Διαλέγομαι, Διαλογίζομαι, Διαλογισμός," ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 93.

of Jesus is good news for every day. Christians ought to be prepared for and looking for opportunities to share the good news about Jesus *everyday*.

Paul patiently reasoned with whoever was in the marketplace and in Athens everyone was daily in the marketplace. He bumped into some very educated people. He met some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (v.18). He also daily, but *patiently, conversed* with them as well.

The word 'converse' (συμβάλλω, *symballō*) used here to described Paul's engagement with the philosophers in the marketplace is different from the word used to describe his engagement with the Jews and devout Gentiles in the synagogue. The word mean "to express differences of opinion..., involving alternative opportunities for presenting contrasting viewpoints—to debate."⁸ Again, Paul interacted with them patiently. He allowed them to speak and then he responded and there was a conversational back and forth between them.

Epicurus (342–270 B.C.) held that pleasure was the chief goal of life, with the pleasure most worth enjoying being a life of tranquillity free from pain, disturbing passions, superstitious fears, and anxiety about death. He did not deny the existence of gods but argued in deistic fashion that they took no interest in the lives of men.

The Cypriote Zeno (340–265 B.C.) was the founder of Stoicism, which took its name from the "painted Stoa" (colonnade or portico) where he habitually taught in the Athenian agora. His teaching centered on living harmoniously with nature and emphasized man's rational abilities and individual self-sufficiency.⁹



Paul patiently endured and answered their **questions**. They asked him, "What do you want to say?" (v.18) "What is this new teaching that you are presenting?" (v.19). "What do this teaching mean?" (v.19).

Paul also had to patiently endure their **criticism**. They called him a "**babbler**," a word originally used of birds picking up grain, then of scrap collectors searching for junk, then extended to those who snapped up ideas of others and peddled them as their own without understanding them."¹⁰

There was evidently some confusion among the philosophers about what Paul was actually teaching. Some thought he was preaching about more than one god, i.e. "foreign divinities"

⁸ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 437.

⁹ Richard N. Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: John and Acts*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 473–474.

¹⁰ Ibid.

(v.18). Luke tells us, in an aside in v.21, that Athenians and all residents of Athens, including foreigners, were fascinated with “telling and hearing something new.”

Thus, they “**took hold of**” Paul (v. 19). The word carries the notion of being grabbed or “seized” with the hands and intentionally taken to a place. They took Paul to the **Areopagus**, or literally, “the hill of Ares.” The rocky hill overlooked the agora, the marketplace below. Ares was the Greek god of thunder. He was equated with Mars, the Roman god of war, thus, this hill is also called Mars Hill. This is the location where the city council met. Evidently these philosophers were interested in a more formal hearing of what Paul was teaching and preaching.



Paul's Proclamation (v.22-31)

Paul does not begin by referring to Scripture, mentioning the history of Israel, or explaining that Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecy. Paul begins by demonstrating the fact that he had been paying attention to them. He begins by making observations about them. Paul is considering his audience. He is not speaking to a Jewish audience, so he does not employ Jewish connection points. Rather, he aims to connect with his Gentile audience using Gentile connection points.

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. Acts 17:22-23 (ESV)

Paul acknowledges that they are **religious** and very devout **worshippers**. However, he points out that being religious and devout is not sufficient to enjoy eternal salvation with God the Creator. The Athenians believed that God existed, but they did not know Him. They believed that there were many gods and they were very concerned not to offend any of them.

They had idols to all the gods throughout the city, but just in case they missed one, they even made an altar “To the Unknown God.” The Palatine Museum in Rome is an altar to “*Agnostos Theos*,” or “Unknown God.”



God Created Worshipers

Paul uses this ambiguous alter to proclaim the one true God who made the whole world and everything in it. He was engaging these philosophers who knew that there existed beings who were greater and higher than humans. Life had to come from a source beyond humanity. Thus, life had to have come from God. He quoted two Greek poets who also believed this. God is the one who created us and gave humans life. Thus, if he is the possessor and source of life, then He must be vastly greater than us. This great God, then, who made the earth, cannot possibly be confined to tiny temples made by man.

God Needs Nothing, Worshipers Need Everything

Furthermore, it cannot be that humans serve him "as though he needed anything." God is the great Giver "of life, and breath, and everything." If our very life, breath, and everything comes from Him, and we are completely dependent upon Him in order to keep living, then how can it be that He is somehow dependent upon us to provide Him anything. *If we are dependent upon Him for everything, then He cannot be dependent upon us for anything!* Thus, we ought to serve Him as though He needs us. God *needs* us for nothing. He does choose to include us in almost everything He does, but he *needs* us for nothing.

All People Need to Know Him

Every nation on earth is dependent upon Him for the very land upon which they live. God is the one who determines national boundaries and it was He who first said, "Go, multiply, be fruitful and fill the earth." His intention is for all nations to seek Him until they find Him. God wants all people to seek Him and find Him. He has created within us a desire to discover our Creator, and He has placed within us a yearning to know our God.

God is Not Far

And He is not far from us. The very life-breath within us comes from Him. In this sense, He is near us. We are His creation. But we need to think carefully about Him. If we have our life from Him, then why on earth would any of us think that a statue, crafted by human hands, can actually be a god. We breathe. Stone statues do not. We move. Idols do not. We have offspring. Granite "gods" do not reproduce. They can't cough or sneeze or even take one step. Thus, are you philosophers very wise in thinking that these stone statues are actually gods?

Judgment Day Is Fixed

The times of ignorance are over. You/we cannot go on thinking like this. The coming of Jesus has changed everything. Since his coming, God has now "commanded all people everywhere to repent" of sin and turn to Him through Jesus. No one can now plead ignorance over the work of God and His ways. It is time for the world to repent of sin and turn to God through Jesus. God's judgment will be a judgment of perfect righteousness. There is no partiality with God. His justice will be perfect just as His character is perfect. The death of Jesus proves that He is serious about sin and that all sinners deserve death and will receive the sentence of death. However, God raised Jesus from the dead, to prove that He is serious about giving

eternal life to those who go to God through Jesus. He is just as serious about giving eternal life to those who place all faith and trust in Jesus as He is about sentencing to eternal death those who ignore His costly provision of salvation. This is what the resurrection of Jesus proves. And the one man whom God raised from the dead, is Jesus of Nazareth, the messiah.

Response to the Proclamation

There are three typical responses to the proclamation of the gospel, 1) rejection, 2) contemplation, and 3) acceptance. Some people outright reject the gospel and mock it as plain nonsense. These say things like, "You're nuts and this is crazy!" While others are like, "Hmm, this is interesting. I'll think about it. I may have a few more questions for you." Yet others are like, "Yes! This is true. I know it down in the depths of my soul. Yes, I believe in Jesus and I will surrender my life to Him." Among those who responded in this way was a handful of men and a member of the council itself. **Dionysius the Aeropagite** became a believer. This is amazing. One of the members of the very council who listened to Paul preach was persuaded and placed his faith in Jesus, as did a woman named **Damaris**.

Evangelistic Take Aways

1. Every human worships something, but not every human being worships the Creator. Each of us has been created as a worshiper and we ought to be inwardly provoked that not everyone worships his or her Creator. Christians ought to be provoked by and not at peace with the fact that the one true and living God is mostly ignored by the majority of humanity.
2. Sharing the gospel must be engaged in patiently, prayerfully, and reasonably. Salvation belongs to the Lord. He gives it to whom He will, but He does it through the patient and reasonable explanation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christians ought to share the gospel with passionate gentleness, humble firmness, and joyful sobriety. We renounce spiritual arm-twisting, theological bullying, and project-driven motivations that aim only at getting someone to "pray the prayer" without really treating them as a person and prayerfully discerning what the Lord Jesus would have us say to them rather than merely repeating some evangelistic framework we've memorized. Christians must depend upon the Holy Spirit to help us engage in a conversation and reason with the person with whom we are speaking. A friend of mine said to me this week, "Before you ever speak to a person about God, first speak to God about that person."
3. Be ready to be peppered with questions, for which you will depend upon the Holy Spirit to help you answer (Mt. 10:20).
4. Be prepared to say that being "religious" or "spiritual" is not enough to receive eternal life. Being a worshiper is not enough. Being religious is not enough. Being spiritual is not enough. One must worship God the Father through faith in Christ Jesus His only Son.

5. Be ready to be made fun of and mocked as a “babbler” for the sake of the name of Jesus.
6. Be ready to be “laid hold of.” Be prepared to be physically accosted for the sake of the gospel. In many places in the world, delivers already are physically abused for the sake of the name of Jesus. I suspect that day will soon come to the United States.
7. Be ready to be hauled before councils and courts. This is your opportunity to bear witness to the name of Jesus.

Matthew 10:17-20 (ESV) 17 Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, 18 and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. 19 When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. 20 For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

8. Be on the lookout for cultural connections and contemporary literature that may be an open door to sharing the gospel.
9. Be ready to proclaim the facts of the gospel including that God created this world and everything in it, that He is sovereign over this world, that He sent Jesus to this earth, that Jesus died, that he was raised from the dead, and that God through Him will one day judge the world. The to safely survive that judgment is by immediately putting all your faith and trust in Jesus.
10. Be prepared for some to laugh at you, some to want to talk more, and some to receive the gospel and believe in Jesus.

Conclusion

Let me offer some concluding thoughts and observations.

First, are you at all **provoked** at vain worship that surrounds you? All people are worshipers. God created us to worship. Every single human being will worship something. But does the fact that the people around us are worshiping things are are not God provoke you? Does is trouble you the point that you are willing to reason with those around you?

As followers of Jesus, can we really remain silent and allow people to worship wealth, health, education, pleasure, and power and not say anything to them? Can it be possible that the people of God can see the lost all around us and not patiently proclaim the hope of the gospel? If we are the people of God and we are not provoked in our spirits at the dreadful situation of the lost all around us, then perhaps we have our eyes on the wrong things. If our

neighbors around us are worshiping everything but God, and we're ok with that, then maybe we need God to touch our hearts with His love for the nations.

Second, Christians must be **patient** and prayerful in our speaking about Jesus. We must admit that we cannot convert anyone. We have no power to change anyone's heart. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. God has not called us to make converts. God has called us to bear witness to the good and wonderful work that he has done in our lives.

Third, when we **proclaim** the gospel, remember that we are proclaiming a person, not a religion. We are proclaiming what God has done through Jesus. The aim of the gospel is to introduce people to Jesus, not convert them to a religion. Paul simply proclaimed what God had done through Jesus. God raised Jesus from the dead. This makes Jesus different from every other god in the world. Jesus is a man whom God raised from the dead and exalted to His right hand as the judge of all the earth.

Perhaps if we were a little closer to Jesus then we would be moved by that which moves him and we would more easily and quickly go in the direction in which he would lead us?