

“God-Centered Evangelism”
Acts 17:16-34
September 7, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

Suppose you have two neighbors, both of whom have no relationship with Jesus. Your neighbor to the right, let's call her Rebekah, is a church-going non-Christian. She grew up in church and still attends Sunday morning services just about every week. But she is an angry woman who holds grudges and doesn't forgive. Since Jesus has said that a chronic lack of forgiveness toward others is an indication of a lack of faith, it seems clear to you, on Jesus' authority, that this woman is really not a Christian. Your neighbor to the left, let's call him Sam, is a self-confessed non-Christian. He is a professor of sociology at the university downtown, and his view of Christians is that that they have been socialized to believe in Jesus. He has no particular problem with your choice to believe, but has made it very clear that it's just not for him. You believe that God has placed you between these two non-Christians, and you have been praying for an opportunity to share the gospel with them both.

Would you talk about Jesus any differently with religious Rebekah than with secular Sam? The apostle Paul did. Luke records for us several of Paul's sermons, and makes sure to include sermons Paul delivered both to religious people like the Jews and to very pagan people like the ones we find in Athens in this passage. We saw back in Acts 13 the way Paul preached to the Jews who were very familiar with the Old Testament. We see in this passage the way he preached to the pagans who had no familiarity with the Old Testament. By the way, I think it is clearly the case that the secular Sam's are a growing segment in America. We need to know how to present the gospel to people who have little familiarity with the Bible. Paul shows us the way here, and what strikes me about this passage the most is how God-centered Paul was. I would like for us to look at his God-centered motivation and his God-centered message. If we are to reach our unchurched non-Christian friends, then we too will need such God-centered evangelism.

I. A God-Centered Motivation

What moved Paul to evangelize in Athens? The circumstances of his arrival here made it unlikely that much evangelism would take place. Let's retrace his steps in order to find out how he got here. Remember that God had called him to evangelize in the region of Macedonia after he saw in a vision a man from Macedonia saying, **“Come over to Macedonia and help us”** (16:9). Luke then records his visit to three different cities of Macedonia, all of which had evangelistic fruit but which ended rather badly. In Philippi, he was beaten

severely and thrown into prison. In Thessalonica, he was chased out of town by an angry mob. He escaped to Berea, where things started well. But then the mob that had chased him out of Thessalonica followed him to Berea and stirred up opposition. This opposition seemed particularly aimed at Paul, indicated by the fact that his fellow Christians in Berea escorted Paul away from the city while leaving the rest of his church planting team in Berea. They escorted him to safety in Athens, and then left him alone there as they returned to Berea.

This series of events suggests two compelling reasons for Paul *not* to evangelize. First, he was by himself, and Jesus had emphasized with his disciples the importance of undertaking their missionary work in teams rather than by themselves. He had sent them out two by two, and Paul had continued to follow this wise counsel from the Lord. When his partnership with Barnabas had broken up over a dispute concerning John Mark (15:36-41), neither Paul nor Barnabas ever considered the possibility of continuing alone. Rather, they each chose new partners before continuing. But now Paul is very much alone and doesn't want to continue in that state. That's why he commanded his escorts to tell **"Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible"** (v. 15). The second reason not to evangelize here is that he is on vacation. Luke doesn't call it that, but it sure sounds like it to me. He has just had three very difficult ministry experiences in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea, and he needs a bit of a break. This is the perfect time and the perfect place for a little R & R. Athens, after all, was the cultural and intellectual capital of the empire. Home to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, it boasted of a rich philosophical tradition. It was also a city filled with beautiful buildings and monuments, some of which are still with us today and still attract tourists.

So it would have been understandable, and perhaps even advisable, for Paul to take a little break from the rigors of church planting and become a tourist for just a few days while he waited for Silas and Timothy to join him. That's not what he did. We read in verse 16 that Paul's **"spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols."** The word that is translated "provoked" in our version is the Greek word *paroxyno*, from which we get our English word *paroxysm*. Paul's spirit was having a seizure, and it was caused by the rampant idolatry he observed in the city. The adjective that is translated *full* in the phrase "full of idols" means more literally "under" idols, in the sense of being covered or even smothered in idols.

Paul didn't evangelize just because it was his job. He did so because he had been taught by Jesus to pray, "Hallowed be thy name," and he really meant it. He didn't want people to become Christians for any good feeling it gave to him, but for the more God-centered reason that the glory of God was on the line. The application for us is clear. We will never be properly motivated for the task of evangelism until we have such a God-centered motivation. It is only as we learn to love God and worship him that we will be adequately motivated for such outreach. One of the reasons for this is the fact that many times the best

opportunities for evangelism come at the times most inconvenient for us. Your family is in the middle of watching a really great DVD when the phone rings, and your unbelieving neighbor just wants to talk. You're in a hurry and want to get in and out of the grocery store as quickly as possible when you see a parent from your daughter's soccer team who wants to talk. If our motive for evangelism is self-focused—what it does for us—then we will opt out at such times simply because it doesn't really do anything for us. So our need is to ask God for a heart to love him and his glory more than we love ourselves. That's what Paul had, and it fueled his evangelism.

II. A God-Centered Message

The setting of Paul's message was the Areopagus, or "Mars Hill" in the King James Version. The Areopagus was the supreme council of Athens, a world famous gathering of thinkers and philosophers. It was quite an opportunity for Paul to be invited to speak to such a gathering. There's a great deal we could comment on here. Notice, for example, how Paul shows respect and builds bridges to this audience. He begins not by dwelling on what's wrong with their thinking, but about what is right. **"I perceive that in every way you are very religious"** (v. 22). He quotes from their own philosophers (v. 28), and accommodates himself to their language by avoiding the Old Testament categories he normally used because it would have been foreign to his hearers. I want us to focus our attention, however, on Paul's concluding challenge to them, and use that to summarize this message. In verses 30-31, Paul divides history into three epochs. **"The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed."** There is a past time of ignorance in which God overlooked the sin of idolatry. There is a future day in which he will not overlook sin, but bring judgment upon all idolaters. And then there is the present time, which is the time of repentance.

The past age of ignorance was the time prior to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It was a time of idolatry, and much of Paul's sermon focuses on this sin of idolatry. This was the sin that had gotten Paul so worked up when he first came to Athens, and he wants to speak to the Areopagus about their idolatry, inviting them to know the true God. Their gods were the ones we have all read about in school: Jupiter, Mercury, Bacchus, Neptune, Apollo and many others. It is tempting for us to think that since we don't have gods such as these, that this sin of idolatry no longer applies to us. That would be a great mistake. John Calvin made an oft-quoted statement once when he said that the human heart is an idol factory. I might add that it's an idol factory operating with three eight hour shifts every day of the week. Our heart makes idols whenever we look to something other than God as absolute, as that which can bring the meaning and comfort into our lives that only God can really bring. Money, for example, is a common idol in our culture. The Bible says that money is a gift from

God, to which we should respond with gratitude to God and to enjoy without a guilty conscience. But because the human heart is an idol factory, we make money absolute. We look to it for such things as security, joy and identity, when we ought to look to God for these things instead. We serve it tirelessly, giving ourselves to it completely. Why are idols so common? Why do they continue to attract, even though in obvious ways they are ridiculous and impotent? The problem is that it is easier for us to see how ridiculous idols are when they belong to another culture. It is ridiculous to us that anyone would ever believe that a god named Baal controls the rain and brings fertility to the ground. But that's because he's not our idol. Our own idols are just as ridiculous as Baal, but since they are our idols, we don't see this. Consider again the idol of money, a powerful idol in American culture. It is a ridiculous idol simply because it doesn't work. It promises security but cannot deliver. The money itself is not secure, as evidenced by the fact that people lose fortunes all the time. It promises happiness, but it never has and never will be able to provide it.

If idols, both in biblical days and today, are so impotent, what's their attraction? We like them because we can control them and domesticate them. Paul says that the true God **“does not live in temples made by man”** (v. 24). He goes on in verse 25 to say that the true God is not **“served by human hands, as though he needed anything,”** but rather serves mankind by providing for us. An idol is like a pet god, dependent upon us and one to whom we like to teach tricks to do at our bidding.

Lest you think I'm overstating the situation, let's take one of the common idols of our culture and examine it more carefully. The individualism of American culture is at one level a good gift from God. I am thankful that I am more than the family or group from which I have come, and that I can be judged in part by my own performance. That's individualism at its best. But we have taken this gift from God and have made it into an idol. We do so by viewing our self as ultimate. Everything centers on us and should be about us. So when we choose a church, the question to be asked is not which one God would have us join, but which one meets my needs. Someone showed me a couple of years ago a video that someone produced to make fun of the “Me-centered church.” The video shows people describing what they want in a church in order for them to agree to come. One lady says, “I want a church that doesn't start until I get there, even if I'm late.” Then the announcer's voice comes on and says, “You got it; at this church we don't start until you get there.” Another man says, “I want 50 yard line tickets to the Super Bowl” after which the announcer pronounces again that this church will somehow deliver. Some churches do evangelism in a way that reinforces this idol of individualism. The message is given that coming to Christ will make you successful in every area of your life. If you want a successful marriage, successful relationships or financial management or any number of other things, that faith in Jesus is the best way to reach your goals. Such a message will definitely bring in many worshipers, but it is a man-centered message. It attempts to domesticate God to serve our individual desires, while our main problem goes unaddressed.

Our main problem is our assertion of self over God, and this message makes that worse, not better.

Paul says that God has in previous times, before Jesus, overlooked such idolatry. He has refrained from bringing judgment upon those guilty of it. But we must not make the mistake of thinking that for that reason no judgment will ever come. In the future, God **“has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness”** (v. 31). This is a component of the gospel that is often omitted today. The gospel has been reduced to one assertion only, that God is love. Without question, that is a true statement. But without the context of the reality of judgment, it becomes a meaningless assertion. The holiness and judgment of God must stand with the love of God in order to have a full gospel. It’s like a pair of scissors in which half of the scissors have been removed, rendering what is left completely useless. There is nothing wrong with the assertion of God’s love, as long as we are faithful to the whole Bible and also assert the reality of judgment. Several people have asked my opinion of the best-selling novel *The Shack*, by William P. Young. I have not finished reading it yet, and I plan to give a fuller review of it in the next church newsletter. But so far it seems to me to fit into this pattern of emphasizing the love of God and denying his judgment. The book is about a man named Mackenzie who meets the Trinitarian God in a shack. God the Father appears as a large African-American woman named Papa, and Mackenzie is talking to her about this topic of judgment. He asks, “But if you are God, aren’t you the one spilling out great bowls of wrath and throwing people into a burning lake of fire?” (p. 119). God answers, “I don’t need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. It’s not my purpose to punish it; it’s my joy to cure it” (p. 120).

A God-centered message not only challenges the idols of the heart, and gives warning about the judgment that will come upon such idolatry, but it also offers hope in Jesus. The present age, Paul says, is the time for repentance. **“But now he commands all people everywhere to repent”** (v. 30). There is full and eternal forgiveness for all sin and idolatry in Jesus. We come to receive this forgiveness through repentance and faith. Our hearts may be idol factories, but as God shows us his kindness and mercy, we come to know the true God. We learn to praise him, obey him and love him.

CONCLUSION:

The wonder of the gospel is that the one who has been appointed as supreme judge on Judgment Day is the very same one who has died for our sins. Your judge is also your savior, and that means that you are safe in the arms of Jesus.