

To Boldly Go

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[0 : 0 0] Now we'll go back and finish the chapter, Acts chapter 17, where Paul has moved from Thessalonica and he's gone to Berea, and now he's moving to Athens, verse 16. While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, what is this babbler trying to say? Others remarked, he seems to be advocating for in gods. They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus in the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, may we know what this new teaching is that you're presenting? You're bringing some strange ideas to our ears and we want to know what they mean. All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas. Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, men of Athens, I see that in every way you're very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship,

I even found an altar with an inscription to an unknown God. Now what you worship is something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he's not served by human hands as if he needed anything because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth and he determined the time set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him. Though he's not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being. Some of your own poets have said we are his offspring. Therefore since we are God's offspring we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he is set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead some of them sneered. Others said we want to hear you again on this subject that Paul left the council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus and also a woman named Demaris and a number of others. So that's the chapter that we're going to look at this evening. Just by way of introduction and to answer the question, what do you know, this is going to be a rhetorical question, I don't expect an answer for this one but I will expect some answers for the other ones. Do we know what Paul, what Luke is doing here? As we go through the Gospel, as we go through the book of Acts, the Acts of the Apostles, what is Luke doing? Well we probably need to go back to chapter 1 because in chapter 1 of Acts and verse 7 and 8 we have Jesus being taken up into heaven and Jesus, just before he's getting taken up into heaven, he says, it is not for you to know the times and dates the Father is set by his own authority but you will receive the power of the Holy Spirit when it comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria and to all the ends of the earth. And really the account that we have in Acts is the account of that being fulfilled. Is the Gospel going out from Jerusalem to Judea to all the ends of the earth and it's a kind of concentric circles out the way as the Gospel goes out and Luke is recording the fulfilling of the great commission to make disciples to go and it's a going book, it's an active book going out and the church that Luke describes in Acts is a cent church, right from the very beginning you've got that great commission of the Lord God, he says go out with the Gospel, tell people about Jesus Christ, share the Gospel because it's a great Gospel and that is your commission, go and make disciples and so Luke is really expressing that and saying that that is what the early church did, it went out, it was a sending church and it was a cent church and it was a going church and that was a really fundamental and important mindset that that early church had, it was a church that was outward facing and outward looking, it went out with the Gospel, it sent people, an active people moving out with this good news and I think over time and through history we've changed a little

bit, I suppose in some ways it's a little bit natural, I'm not sure it's a good thing, I'm pretty convinced it's not a good thing for us but we've become much more of a sitting church than a cent church, we're much more content to sit back and tell the world come in and see as if you would like, come along to who we are and see what we're like, rather than being a people who go out and have a sense of mission and a sense of being sent out with this great and glorious message of Jesus Christ, easy for us I think to become passive, to be a sitting, to be sitting Christians, to be a sitting church, apologetic and I don't mean that in the kind of apologetic way that we're giving a reason for our faith, I think sometimes we can be apologetic in the wrong way for our faith that we're kind of a bit embarrassed by it and that we can become insular, protective of ourselves and separated for lots of different reasons, sometimes we're afraid, sometimes we think nobody maybe would be interested in what we have to share in our lives but the encouragement and I think the model and the picture here is of a church that was a cent church that goes out with the gospel, brave, courageous, risk taking at so many different levels but going out into the world without Jesus Christ and living and sharing the gospel and I think Paul is a great kind of model of that, I think in many ways he's unlike any other Christian that's ever been in his abilities and his gifts to reach all kinds of different people, in many ways I think he's a model for the church as the church goes out and I hope we'll see that a little bit this evening.

So moving on to the questions that we have and I'll just come a little bit nearer because it makes it easier for you and me and the first question, okay, I didn't get a chance to look back on the website tonight or today to find out if anyone had put answers into the questions on the website but I will do at some point, I hope you've been able to but if not you might be able to, there's just some quick answers tonight really that will trigger I hope some of our thoughts in this chapter.

But if you see the first question, Paul seems comfortable to share the gospel message in a variety of contexts so you've got all kinds of different contexts where Paul shares the gospel in this chapter.

[8 : 14] He goes into the synagogue in each place that he goes and we've seen that already as a pattern that he goes into, when he goes into a new place he first goes to the synagogue, we've seen that, we always go first to the synagogue and we also see in verse 17 of this chapter that he goes into the marketplace and also that he goes to the, what's called the areopagus, okay, when he's in Athens and the question I've asked is what do you think are the modern day equivalents of these places, I don't know, I'm not going to use that.

Unless you're sitting there, but Ali wants to use it, okay, so okay, Andy's got a microphone but I think it's going to take a bit too long to kind of go around all different places in the congregation with it, but I'll repeat to you what the answers people give, okay.

So what do you think, did, at any of you thought what might be the modern day equivalent, we're reaching out with the gospel, what do you think would the modern day equivalents be of the synagogue, the synagogue might be quite a difficult one, the synagogue, the marketplace and the areopagus, can you think of what they might be if you were to think about the church today reaching out into society in which we live, are there any parallels between reaching out with the gospel into similar situations, similar kind of areas today, what about the synagogue, what would you regard as being a modern day parallel, the pub, modern day of the synagogue?

Okay, well okay, our Jewish brothers might not be too delighted if you said that the synagogue's parallel was the pub, I would have said the pub was more likely to be the parallel of the marketplace where the people are, but you may know more Jews than I do.

Is there any, okay, so the pub's are, is that old? New age festivals, okay, is a parallel for the synagogue a religious place that people are, yep, okay, anything else?

[10 : 20] Well, I thought of, I thought the synagogue, initially when I thought of a modern day parallel would, I mean there's a synagogue in Edinburgh, so a modern day parallel could be a synagogue, but maybe not so much as a religious place, a place where religious people are meeting.

Paul always went to the religious place, the place where people had a sense of fear of God, he went there first, and he went there with the Gospel, and he usually spoke to them from the Old Testament because they knew the Bible, so he went to that place first, and so maybe a modern day equivalent for us in terms of reaching out to the Gospel is just that we share the Gospel in the church context as well, and there may be a lot of people in church contexts, I know it's slightly different from the synagogue, but nonetheless in church context, who aren't believers, but who have a sympathy for the truth, and there may be people in modern day kind of religious festivals who also have a degree of sympathy with spiritual truth, even though they are not following the way, the way of Christ and the Christian way, so we do recognize that we go out with the Gospel as believers, we preach the Gospel in the churches, in the places where people are who are maybe sometimes not Christians as well, so we need to remember that, but at the same time we need to beware, because who opposed Paul most, it was the Jewish people from the synagogues, they harassed him, they followed him to different cities to terrorize him and to oppose him, and we need to beware that sometimes in the churches there are terrorists who oppose the Gospel message, who hate the

Gospel message, because it stands against a religion of good works that they believe will make them right before God, as I mentioned this morning, they hate the Gospel because it speaks about the need for grace and the need that would all equal, and that before God we need a redeemer, and so we recognize that within the churches.

Okay, so there's the synagogues, then there's the marketplace, what would be the modern equivalent of Paul going to Athens to the marketplace, the marketplace was the Agora, the centre of public life, where everyone gathered, where everyone was there, now what would be, what do you think, someone mentioned the pub earlier on, that might be a modern day equivalent of that, sorry, Facebook, okay, that's a kind of virtual marketplace, everyone level, people are there, people are on that all the time, what else, the shopping mall, the shopping mall, American, American, we call them shopping mall, shopping centres in Scotland, okay, the mall, okay, you go there with a mall, anywhere else, that might be a modern day equivalent, Highland Show, in Edinburgh, yeah, that's a place where lots of people gathered, it's only once a year, so Ivan will be expecting you to go with the tracks there next year, with the Gospel, the Highland Show, but I guess basically the marketplace is really anywhere that people are today, that was where the people gathered and Paul went there with the message, he went to speak to them with the Gospel and whether it be in street cafes or in the shops or wherever it happens to be, Paul is willing to go and to share the Gospel and I think we need to be the same, we need to be going to where the people are in order to share the Gospel, so you've got the churches and you've got the kind of everyday life of the people in the marketplace and we need to be, however we do that, we need to be among people in their lives and in their situation so that we can share the Gospel with them as we share our lives with them and I think that's hugely significant that we don't retreat into a bubble of Christian safe keeping, safe day, as it were and have no contact with the world that needs to know about Jesus and needs to hear the Gospel, that we want to do that, we want to share that, okay, so the marketplace, whatever that happens to be, I don't think we should be scared to go anywhere with the Gospel of

Jesus Christ in our lives and the motive being to let people know. The third place is the Ariopagus, Mars Hill, I'm not sure if there's a modern day account, can anyone think, the Ariopagus was usually the place where the Athenian leaders gathered, they discussed important things, they were the guardians of the city, spent a lot of time in philosophical discussion.

[15 : 25] I'm not quite sure if you can think of any modern, is there any modern day equivalent of that? The Royal Society of Edinburgh, that may well be, yep, it may well be, anything else?

Sorry, the City Council, Jeremy Balfour, you may have something to say about that, but indeed the place where the decisions are made in the city, the City Council, potentially the debating halls in the universities, the political arena, the place where social commentaries made, whatever that happens to be, question time, these kind of places where intellectuals discuss philosophical ideas.

And I think what the Holy Spirit is teaching us through this is that we don't leave the Christian message out of these places, it's not ashamed and the Gospel stands up to intellectual, rigorous debate and questioning, and we need people, thinkers in our churches who will battle against the secular philosophies of our day and stand up for the Christian Gospel in these circumstances.

We need people who are going to be strong and who are going to be able to argue confidently and consciously against the ideologies of our day, which are anti-Christian, and we shouldn't be ashamed or embarrassed by that.

And it's perfectly comfortable, the Gospel is perfectly comfortable, the truth, absolutely comfortable in any company, and it stands up to any rigorous examination, even although we recognise people choose to reject it.

[17 : 23] So we see here almost a model of the church that's reaching out into all different strategies of society, different parts of society, different backgrounds, different, the ordinary people, the intellectuals, the politicians, the religious people, the secular people, all the people, we have in a picture in this chapter of the Gospel reaching out into all of them, they're all relevant, they all need the Gospel, and the early church was unafraid to sit, unafraid to not sit but to move out and to reach out with the Gospel, I think.

We are looking for as Christians, and as a church, to be willing to be out there, to live our Christian lives, to be unafraid in the universities and in the working environment and in the marketplace and in the churches that we go out with the Gospel.

It's easy to sit back, it's easy to sit in our pews and be condemnatory to just dam the world out there and have nothing to do with it. It's easy to be, stay at home Christians, stay at home until heaven Christians, that we know what we believe and well, everyone else can believe what they want.

But the church that Christ Jesus speaks about here is a reaching out church, compassionate church, a loving church, church that cares for the Gospel and cares that other people here and there will respond to the Gospel, but we also know that because of that it's a real risky church and we'll be opposed, and maybe that's what will happen for us as well as we take risks we will find that we will be opposed.

Okay, just quickly moving on to the second question, can some of you list, or sorry, can you list some of the different words used by Luke here to describe how Paul communicated the message, IE we're told he reasoned with those that listened to him, and also words used to describe the hearer's responses.

[19 : 25] So if you've looked at the chapter you might find that there's a lot of different words used to explain how Paul shared the Gospel.

You think of some of these? He debated, yeah, he reasoned is the word that one I gave you as well. What else?

He proclaimed, that's another word, he spoke forth the Gospel. Anything else?

Addressed, he addressed them, yeah. Yeah, he explained it.

He what? Yep, he claimed Jesus as a Messiah. Preached, I'll give you some words.

[20 : 29] He reasoned, he explained, he proved, he proclaimed, he persuaded, he preached, he taught. Okay, there's some different words to explain the Gospel that he was sharing, he didn't do it in one particular way.

And then we also hear of those who received it, they received it with eagerness, they examined it, they believed it, they disputed it, they sneered at it. So you have in this chapter a whole kind of different responses and ways that Jesus, that Paul brings the Gospel to the people.

There's a variety of methods of communication of bringing the Gospel to the people. Now I love the half hour preaching monologue, that's why I do, that's my job, I've done it for 25 or 26 years.

It's great, it's great to prepare for it, it's great to deliver it and I value it greatly and I think it's a significant and important thing. But it's not the only means of, it's not all that preaching is, it's pulpit presentation of the Gospel, but preaching biblically is a much wider understanding.

And Paul here preached the Gospel in all these different ways, he explained it, he answered questions, he persuaded them, he spoke to them and there's all this different way of getting the Gospel across.

[21 : 53] Question and answer, debate, explaining. And we need to remember that as we live it, when we think of preaching we simply think of the half hour monologue, which you're all sitting very passively, I'm the one doing the work from the front, although you're listening, of course, very significantly and spiritually you're involved in that way and I don't decry that and I think that's very important.

But it is one way of getting the truth across and in the society we live in, it's not the most popular way of getting the truth across and it may be we will need to think much more in our Christian lives when we are sharing the Gospel, that we don't necessarily stand on a soapbox to share it, but that we reason with people, we argue with people, we persuade people, we listen to people and we give answers to people and that is hugely challenging for us because it takes us out of our comfort zone.

I've got a pulpit in front of me to protect me and generally people don't come back with questions, difficult questions or questions to further explain what I'm saying, I would love that opportunity kind of informally afterwards.

But going into the marketplace with the Gospel is much more challenging, going into the places where you don't have a receptive audience is much harder and we're asked to do that gracefully and prayerfully because we need to share the Gospel with others.

It's important that we have doctrine, can I say that, that we have truth to share, but it's also very important that we're not indoctrinating people, that is expecting people to uncritically accept anything we say.

[23 : 54] It's not indoctrination that we believe in, it's the persuasion of truth through the spirit with doctrine, with the truth that there is and that is very significant.

Okay, and I think we need to pray about that and recognise that there's not going to be all kinds of different responses, some will be positive, some will be negative, will be sneered at by some people but others will believe and there's always that different responses to the Gospel message in our lives.

Okay, time's going on, we'll just quickly look at the last couple of questions. Paul's summary message in the Areopagus, verses 22 to 32, what five descriptions does he give of God?

So here Paul is preaching in front of this learned bunch of philosophical people and he seems at this point to be preaching kind of similarly to what we understand by preaching but he makes important points of contact with them, he talks about their poets, he makes reference to their city which is full of idols, he's been a tourist, he's walked around Athens, he understands the kind of city it is and he's seen all the idols that are there, he cares about getting the message across because he takes time to respect the city and to bring what the city does into his sermon and he's distressed, we're told, by the idolatry.

It's the same word distressed, it's the same word that is used of God's hatred of idolatry. It's the same kind of word as jealous, there's a jealousy and a good jealousy as opposed to a bad jealousy, a jealousy that God demands the rightful worship because he's God and he's jealous of his love being shared with idols with those that are dead and hopeless.

[25 : 54] That's that kind of divine, pure jealousy, it's a kind of jealousy that we would speak about as well if there was a third party in your marriage that you would be jealous for your husband or wife, remember that famous interview with Diana, Lady Diana where Martin Bashir asks her about her marriage, she says, well there was three of us in the marriage so it was a bit crowded, she was jealous that there was someone else taking the rightful place of her in that marriage and it's that kind of jealousy that's spoken of here when there's a distress about the idols that Paul sees and the idols that God recognizes are taking the worship away from himself.

So he speaks to the people here in the Areopagus in these verses and he says he describes God in five ways to them, remember this is a people that don't know, he speaks to them differently as he speaks to the people in the synagogues, he doesn't use the Old Testament but he says five things about God, are you able to say what they are?

Verses 22 to 32, he describes God to them, any idea? Sorry? Yeah, he's a creator God so that's the first thing he starts off with God as creator, the Epicureans and the Stoics were kind of ideas of God being either not interested or just far away and a potent who didn't care about his people and were fatalistic or just pleasure seeking and God was irrelevant to them so he brings in this idea of God being this creator God, starts off with that, what else does he say?

It's all kind of related to that, it falls down from that. Sorry? Yes, he's the sustainer of life in which we live and move and have our being so he's the creator God but he's not a distant God, he's a God that is in the very core of who we are and what we do is the sustainer of life and we're not independent of him, the lives we have today are lives that come from him, in him we live and move and have our being and he's involved.

Yes indeed, he doesn't live in a temple, he is sovereign and he is over the whole of the world, he's the ruler as well of the nations and he's a God who is ruler of the nations.

[28 : 47] What else do you say? Well he uses that to describe their God. Okay, yes, he's revealing to them what they regard as an unknown God and Paul is making him known, he's revealing him.

There's a couple of other things, just the fourth and fifth one, what is the father of humanity, he talks about God as the one who yes we get our life and breath from but also since we are God's offspring.

Now that's not often spoken about in the Bible, that this great illustration of all of humanity belonging to God, that we are God's offspring, we're God's children, yes we're the strange children because of sin but we are nonetheless His children and that's a very important point and it keeps us from having a despising attitude I think towards those who are outside of the faith because we all need Christ and we're all made in God's image even though that image is broken and so he appeals to that image that God's aren't far away and distant but he's much closer to you than he thinks and then he brings, he finishes off and I don't think for a moment this is a complete sermon, just snippets of it, he brings in the fact that God is also judge for he is set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he appointed, he is given proof of all this by raising him from the dead.

So we have this God who is coming back to judge the world and he'll judge the world through Jesus Christ, I mean Christ isn't actually mentioned in this passage but I'm sure that he was mentioned in this sermon but he is reminding the audience that God is a just God, God to whom we are accountable, we are moral beings in a moral universe and that he introduces Christ through his resurrection and that is key, the resurrection is key to nearly all of the teaching of Paul in New Testament and if you look to the beginning of this chapter again when he speaks in the synagogue it's still the resurrection that's key so even though he comes to a different way in the synagogue he comes through the Old Testament, through the proof of the Old Testament, here he still comes to the resurrection as being key and that links in with this morning and the importance of recognizing Christ as our foundation because he's living, the importance of the resurrection because it speaks about a living Savior, a living Savior who's risen, who has defeated death that we can trust in but who is also the judge of all mankind, Christ remains core and in our thinking and in our sharing of the Gospel Jesus Christ and his resurrection and of course if you speak about his resurrection he speaks of his death, the two are linked so it's all linked together.

Okay, sorry, go on. Indeed in the past yes but he calls on me to repent absolutely yes of course John thank you for keeping me right there, he calls everyone to repent which links in of course with the Gospel message and I suppose it's subsumed under judgment John that God is judge of all mankind so that we have within that forgiveness because we need to be forgiven before we can stand before the judge of all the earth and so we're reminded in this and I'll not go and do the last question but because the last question just speaks about the different methods that Paul spoke, different methods or different ways Paul spoke in the two different places and you can see that and know that.

[32 : 48] He speaks differently in the synagogue as he does in the Areopagus but he always returns to Christ and that is hugely significant and for us we recognize and know that time is short, opportunities are few, I do think that we're kind of going back to a New Testament situation in the church, we can't just harp after different days and wishing things were different.

These are exciting days, these are great days, this is a great city that we live in, it's called the Athens of the North so we've got the great privilege of going out in the Athens of the North with the Gospel today, we go in the universities and in the streets and during the festival and the Highlands show and whatever else we go we go out with the Gospel and we live it, we don't force it down people's throats, we don't aggravate them with it but we live it and we passionately are concerned to share it with sensitivity, with intelligence, with prayer, with insight, with knowledge of the Scripture, we're confident of the Scripture and we're confident because it's the Word and it's the incarnate Word that speaks of Jesus Christ himself, the crucified and risen Savior before whom everyone will stand to give account.

So it's hugely significant for us to I think learn from Acts and to see how relevant it continues to be and how it helps us to focus our thoughts around the Gospel and the Gospel that we share.

So let's bow our heads briefly in prayer. For God we thank You that the chapter speaks to us today, it's given to us by God to challenge us.

We thank You that the resurrection of Jesus Christ remains so crucial to our faith because it draws our minds to this living stone in whom our lives must be founded and we pray that each of us would have our lives firmly grounded in the living stone that is Jesus Christ and that He would transform us and would give us courage and boldness to live our lives not just by what we say and how we preach but how we live and how we look and how we are that we would be ambassadors for Jesus Christ.

[35 : 12] So help us to be New Testament in our principle and in our actions and to serve God with all our hearts, soul, strength and mind and may Christ be given the glory this evening and every evening of our lives for Jesus' sake.

Amen.