

Words and Deeds: One Size Fits All?
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 46; Luke 24:46-47; Acts 17:15-34

Our final Scripture reading this week comes from Acts 17:15-34. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible. 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 babbling trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and 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 are presenting? You are 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 are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as 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 is 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 times 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 is not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As 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 has 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, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” At that, Paul left the Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.”

“One size fits all.” How many things over the years have been sold as “one size fits all”? Hats for sure. I have exactly one baseball hat I wear all the time because – as no surprise to all of you – I have a big head. Socks are sold in packs where one size fits all – at least five or six different foot sizes are supposed to be fit by this one sock.

Our approach to a lot of things in life is “one size fits all.” Henry Ford famously said that you could have any color of car you wanted – as long as you wanted black. Our public education system is geared around our children all learning the same things at the same times. The recent push for a federal minimum wage of \$15 is another case of “one size fits all” – never mind that living expenses in California are incredibly different from living expenses in the Midwest.

The fact is, we see a lot of things where “one size fits most” because it's the easiest and cheapest way to deal with things. But one size does not fit all. We are all made by God in very unique ways. One child who might flail around hopelessly in a typical public school might make great strides at a special charter school. Someone who struggles to read a Bible might suddenly understand Scripture when they hear it on their audio player. As Christians, God gives us one salvation through Jesus Christ, but Jesus meets each one of us in a unique and personal way.

In today's passage, we see the truth of how God meets us through Paul's outreach to the philosophers and thought leaders of Athens. Now you might remember that, in last week's passage, Paul had to leave Berea despite planting a growing and faithful church there because rabble rousers from Thessalonica had come to stir up trouble against him. His companions Silas and Timothy stayed there for a while to keep building up the church.

The journey was long – while both cities are in modern-day Greece, the distance is over 320 miles. While they may have taken a boat for part of the journey, this was probably about a month's trip. Paul sends words with his escorts to please send Silas and Timothy and the rest of the crew down south as soon as they can leave, for he knows it will be at least two months before they are all together again.

For a time, it seems like he's going to lay low – after all, who knows what will happen without his companions in tow if he gets into trouble. But then the Holy Spirit starts moving in Paul, getting him worked up when he sees all the idols in Athens. Because Athens isn't just any Greek city...it is the center of learning and culture, and the birthplace of democracy. No idea is left unturned in Athens; they are constantly discussing the nature of goodness, beauty, and truth, the nature of reality itself.

But it is home to idols of every god in the Greek pantheon and far beyond – ancient historians said over 30,000 gods had idols in Athens. One even said it was easier to find an idol than a man in Athens! They respect and worship all the gods and goddesses, and there's always room for one more. For all the philosophical ramblings of the various groups, the Greeks are also deeply superstitious about fate and the gods.

Paul starts his work where he always does – at the local synagogue. God has put it in his heart to always start with His chosen people. He brings them the good news of Jesus. Unlike the other cities, we don't know if they believed or not, whether there was an uproar or not. I imagine that the Jews of Athens weren't easy to sway; they heard so many tales of so many gods that they might have been hardened to hearing about the Messiah's finally arriving.

But Paul does get the interest of the philosophers of the city, in particular the Epicureans and the Stoics. Their reactions can be predicted. The Epicureans, according to pastor Ray Stedman, were likely the ones who called Paul a babbler – they were atheistic hedonists who believed that the only thing that existed was material, in the here and now, so enjoy it and grab onto it while you could. Paul's Jesus and the idea of a Kingdom of God beyond our world would have seemed loony to them.

The Stoics, on the other hand, were pantheistic, believing that God was everything and everywhere. They taught that God was all around us. They believed in Fate as universal reason, and they believed you should live not by your passions but by reason. A good Stoic was interested in wisdom, reason, and self-control, and that learning about the gods could teach you more about those things. The Stoics were probably interested in the wisdom of Christianity because they shared some similar outlooks, though not all by a long shot. But even then, their approach to God was radically different from the God of the Bible. What Paul was preaching confused them greatly.

So the philosophers bring Paul to the Areopagus. This is the ancient council of Athens that had met for over 700 years, at one point deciding the outcome of trials and handling many political matters. By Paul's day, it functioned to shape the city's learning and beliefs, what was taught and how. They met up on a place called Mars Hill – sometimes a name used for churches now. And on Mars Hill, Paul brought them Christ.

But he takes a radically different approach than he has everywhere else. He doesn't start by taking them through all the Scriptures to show that Jesus is the Messiah. He doesn't do what he's done before and map out Jesus as David's descendant, the One greater than His great ancestor. He starts at a completely different place. He addresses their religiosity – he uses it to kind of boost their ego. He brings up the fact that even among all these thousands of gods, they have an altar to the unknown God. They know that despite the legions of idols sitting all around them, they've missed somebody. Paul is like, “You've missed the only real one, and I'm going to tell you about Him.”

Paul establishes that God is the one true God, the maker of the world and all people, and that He doesn't need a temple and He doesn't need anything from us. He wants us to seek Him, but He isn't very far from us. All of that is biblical. Yet Paul also quotes from the philosophers themselves, from Aratus and Epimenides, showing their agreement with what he is teaching them about God. And since God is not in any way, shape, or form like an idol – as both the Stoics and Epicureans already believed – God has called people to turn away from them and towards Him. There is a day of judgment coming, and Jesus is that judge.

Ultimately, all of this goes well by the philosophers. The sticking point is the resurrection. It's when Paul mentions that Jesus was raised from the dead that they start rolling their eyes at him. Some would like to hear from Paul again, but others think he's a joke. But surprisingly, at least one member of the Areopagus becomes a believer, along with others who heard Paul's arguments to the philosophers. Some found him foolish, but others found life in Jesus' name through Paul's presentation at Mars Hill.

Where do we connect with the story? I believe the last half of Acts 17 shows us a few key things. First off, the blood of Jesus on the cross does cover all sins of all people – the gospel of Jesus truly is “one size fits all.” *But because God has created us in unique cultures and unique times, there is no “one size fits all” approach to ministry or bringing Christ to others.*

Paul has such a habit of going to the synagogue in each city and discussing Jesus with the Jews that we can lose the fact that he was received differently in every city, and the things he said were not always alike. Today's passage shows that when Paul is up against a completely different audience, he takes a completely different approach. His first word is not “the Messiah has come” because they have no expectation for a Messiah. His first teaching wasn't repentance, as it was the first word from John the Baptist and Jesus, because the pagans didn't know what they needed to repent from!

In the same manner also, our culture is not in the place it was twenty years ago or forty-five years ago or sixty years ago. You didn't have to believe in Jesus during the 1950s, but most people participated in church in some fashion, a good number of people had true faith, and your education included some bits of Christian religion because it was part of American culture. No one objected much to adding the phrase “under God” in 1954 to the Pledge of Allegiance because it was generally believed by all, or at least most.

Today, a lot of folks know nothing about true Christianity, and younger folks in particular have often only been exposed to the parts that our culture disagrees with. People think they know something about the Jesus they've rejected, but they don't. We can no longer expect that someone knows any biblical stories, has any biblical knowledge, and in fact we can expect to have to correct some of the crazy things they might have seen on the History Channel!

But Paul's address to Mars Hill shows that we can do just that. We can have conversations with others that are God-honoring yet also relatable to them and their world. Paul quotes other philosophers to the Aeropagus, not Scripture, so they could understand where he was coming from. (It also showed a respect for their culture and their ways, enough that he knew their poets and could quote them.)

When you talk with your friends who aren't engaged with a church, who don't know Jesus or seem disinterested, find out what they are interested in and how they intersect with the gospel. People are looking for the good news of Jesus, they just don't know Jesus and don't know He's good. But they will look for their spiritual needs elsewhere. And we may be able to help them make the links.

Look at television. There's a show called “The Good Place,” about a woman who gets to the afterlife and is relieved to have made it to “The Good Place,” only to realize that she's there by mistake. Ultimately, she tries to reform so can stay. It's got a perfect rating on Rotten Tomatoes, yet deals with morals, ethics, and philosophy. Is it Christian? No. It's a springboard. Many of my atheist friends enjoy it. It's can start a conversation of whether or not people are genuinely good and if anyone deserves a spot in “The Good Place” at all. It can lead to them coming to faith in the God who sent His Son so we could spend eternity in His truly good place!

There are other cultural touchpoints to the gospel if we are looking for them. We want our political system to fix things, but we know it's broken – who can we turn to when we conclude it's beyond fixing? Our fascination with Harry Potter hints that we know there is something beyond ourselves just out of reach. Our obsession with media – games, TV, Facebook, screens, Netflix – suggests that we are trying to escape our lives. Knowing Jesus means that we have meaning outside of the things we consume in our culture. It isn't hard to see those touchpoints as long as you are looking for them. There are many faithful ways we can introduce Jesus to others as long as we make the introduction.

It also means that we can rejoice that there are different kinds of churches – small churches, medium churches, large churches. They are churches with organs and huge choirs and churches with rock bands and coffee bars and tiny churches meeting in Weight Watchers. They all meet different needs of different people in different ways. We can't be a big church. Kensington can't be a small church. That's OK. God has provided an abundance of riches through the church in America; as long as those churches are truly worshipping and honoring God, we can be glad that the church comes in all kinds of sizes and shapes.

But there's also something to remember, our second and final point: *God must bring hearts towards Him through our conversations because the human heart and mind are set against His intervention in this world.* Paul's conversation was going fine until he brought up the resurrection of Jesus. Why is that where everything seems to fall apart? It's because it's the central point in human history where God directly intervenes and does the impossible...and our unbelief is rattled by God getting involved in a literal way in our lives.

Think through the Bible with me and you'll see just how hard it is to come into contact with the living God. The Israelites are so frightened when thunder and lightning appear on the mountain in the wilderness – and this is after God has saved them from Egypt – they would rather God leave them alone. When Isaiah has a vision of the throne room of God, he cries out, “Woe is me!” He believes he is doomed because he, an unclean man, has seen the holy God. The disciples are scared when their boat starts sinking while Jesus is asleep, but they are terrified when He can end the storm with just a word. These are men who have given up everything, they want to know God, but coming face to face with the unexplainable, the supernatural, the divine, that's beyond human reason and our ability to understand.

The philosophers scoff because despite the 30,000 gods in their city, not one of them has ever spoken to them. Not one has ever made the philosophers do anything. The idea that there really is a god who will bring justice on the world, who is incredibly loving but also just and holy and will condemn those who are wicked and do not repent – easier not to believe.

So share your faith. Tell people about Jesus. Give them the good news that there is a Savior who loves them who will meet them where they are, then change them for the better. Let's not slack on that. But our job is making the introduction, finding appropriate ways to bring God into the conversation, not making them believe. Because human reason only goes so far. Fallen as we are, unless God intervenes, we won't naturally choose to follow Him.

If the people you tell about Jesus scoff, love them, pray for them, but don't feel bad they didn't choose well. They may yet! And if they do believe, know that you've given God glory and you've let Him work through you. Though we're all different, we think differently, we act differently, we have different backgrounds that shape our story, God has made each one of us to glorify Him. He made us differently so that each one of us can share the good news of Jesus in a way that God will use to bring someone else into His Kingdom.