

ReStart Week 8: Different Strokes (Acts 17:16-32)

David Bawks - Pathway Community Church (April 25, 2021)

Good morning Pathway! Welcome to our service this morning. Today is our final week of ReStart, our journey through Acts. We've started in chapter 1 with Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit, and that the disciples would be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. We saw the coming of the Holy Spirit, and how we must reach people in their language. We've seen how the gospel reached the Ethiopian eunuch, and the Roman century, and to Saul of Tarsus even as he fought against the church. Last week we explored the topic of God's calling, learning from the Macedonian call for help that Paul saw in a vision.

We've made it up through Acts 17. Please read with me from verse 16 through 32.

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate 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. ¹⁹ 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?" ²⁰ You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean." ²¹ (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ 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. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

²⁴ "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 human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

²⁹ "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 human design and skill. ³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to

repent. ³¹ 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 everyone by raising him from the dead.”

³² 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.” ³³ At that, Paul left the Council. ³⁴ Some of the people 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.

On our honeymoon we had a chance to spend a day in Athens, and we visited this very hill where Paul shared. I thought it was amazing to see the same place where Plato and Aristotle and Paul would have walked and talked. BG likes to say that she thought that we were going on a romantic getaway for our honeymoon only to discover that her new husband was really on a missionary journey.

Right before this, Paul, Timothy and Silas went through Thessalonica and Berea. Paul is now waiting for them to join him Athens so they can continue their missionary trip, and as he waits he notices pervasive idolatry in the city and that does not sit well with him. Like usual, he debates in the synagogue and the marketplace with all who will listen. This begins to attract some attention, and he receives an invitation to the elite gathering known as the Areopagus, or Mars Hill as we translate it in English.

To understand this story first the nature of the Areopagus must be explained. It was “the seat of a venerable council of elders which was named after the hill west of the acropolis on which its sessions took place, the supreme court of Athens....” (Eckhard Schnabel, “Contextualising Paul in Athens: The Proclamation of the Gospel before Pagan Audiences in the Graeco-Roman World,” *Religion & Theology* 12/2 [2005]: 174.) It is possible that one of the reasons for Paul’s speech was to determine if his god merited a space for a new shrine (Schnabel, 175).

The setting of Mars Hill sets this episode apart from most of the rest of Acts. Paul is not in the synagogue. Rather, he is speaking to people who have no Jewish heritage, biblical knowledge, or experience with Jesus. The typical format of retelling the story of the children of Israel, culminating with the arrival of Jesus Christ as messiah will not resonate with these listeners. Paul was sharing the gospel with people who were culturally and traditionally different and this scenario called for a very different approach. Here are some lessons we can learn about sharing our faith with people of a different religious background.

1) Begin with what you have in common.

Paul first says that he sees that they are very religious. He begins with a point of connection and something they have in common. No matter who you are talking to, there will be something that you have in common. This was not necessarily a compliment, he might have been implying that they are superstitious, but they do both share an interest in religion, so it is something in common.

We must develop points of contact, and then use that starting point to develop what we are trying to say. One of the techniques Paul employs here is that of narrative theology, in which

his brief narrative begins with creation, explains the existence of all nations, introduces humanity's search for God, and ends with the imperative of repentance in light of the day of judgment.

Doing evangelism and reaching those outside of the church are tremendous ministry challenges. Sometimes merely finding our way beyond the church doors is our greatest evangelistic need. Our manner of communication should ideally not be intruding upon people's time and space, either. It is ideal when they come to us, and we are addressing those with at least some kind of interest. Note that Paul was *invited* to speak at Mars Hill. Now, it's unlikely that strangers on the street will invite us to share what we believe with them. For us, it might mean first building a relationship with someone and living out our faith in a way that is obvious and invites interest and questions from them.

After we begin with what we have in common, then we need to be able to explain ourselves clearly.

2) Know your context

Knowing our context is vitally important to effective ministry. Understanding local traditions and narratives can provide just the right bridge to the minds of the local listeners: we must do our homework. In one of our earlier ReStart messages, I've shared about the process of contextualization, which means learning your context in order to evaluate it and share the gospel effectively.

Paul's approach to the Greeks in Athens is dramatically different than how he addressed the Jews in other sermons throughout Acts. In Paul's speech, his illustrations are put in philosophical concepts taken directly from Stoic and Epicurean thought. He quotes twice from Greek poets, or philosophers, including from Epimenides the Cretan. The Epicureans believed that pleasure was the ultimate goal of life, but focused on lasting pleasure not just getting partying and getting drunk and having fun, but a life of tranquility and stability. The Stoics focused on morality and duty.

In other places, Paul warned against vain philosophy. He writes this to the Colossian church: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ" (Colossians 2:8). This has sometimes been interpreted to mean that Christians should have nothing to do with philosophy, and shouldn't ever read or study it, but this cannot be true, since Paul is demonstrating his knowledge and understanding of their own poets and philosophers. And notice that he is qualifying the philosophy that is dangerous, describing it as hollow and deceptive. Not all philosophy is hollow or deceptive, but some philosophy is.

For a while I taught a course at a missions college in Nairobi called Introduction to Philosophy, and we would read some short sections of Plato and Aristotle and Kierkegaard and some African philosophers as well. It's not necessary for all of us to do this kind of study, but depending on our contexts and the people we are in contact with, it can be very helpful in understanding how people think, and the influences that are the foundation to their worldview.

For us today, I think it is very helpful to have a basic understanding of postmodern philosophy, since that is the foundation for so much of how our society operates, and the assumptions that people have and that you see in education and in politics and so on. Some of it is positive, some of it is negative, but all of it can be helpful to understand and to respond in an informed way.

I remember when I used to do street evangelism in Chicago, and it was fairly soon after *The Da Vinci Code* novel by Dan Brown had been published. I disagree with most of what that novel says about how the church came to believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ, but I did read it, and I thought as a story and as a novel it was compelling and page turning. As history, it was also compelling, although biased and highly inaccurate and misleading. In talking to people, I remember multiple occasions when what they said matched the book so closely that I would ask them if they had read it, and often they had. It can be helpful if you know at least part of where someone is coming from, and what is informing their view of Jesus and religion and culture.

Paul's use of pagan philosophy should be enough to retire the notion that philosophy has no value. Of course, not all philosophy is correct, it is not salvific, but it is extraordinarily influential and effective in reaching people. I think one of the most effective ways to share philosophy or a particular viewpoint is to put it into a fictional form – for one, no one can criticize you because it is just a novel, but it also can give it a much broader reach. Or put it into a space drama like Star Wars, which has significant philosophical underpinnings about religion and divinity, and you can reach way more people that way.

In reaching those in our context, we must understand the philosophical paradigms that shape their thinking before we can formulate a coherent message for them, and often these very paradigms can be used in structuring this message. In our context, it is helpful to know the basics of Buddhist and Hindu thought. I haven't done a lot of study on this, and I hope to invest more time here.

3) Answer a question they have.

Paul notes that he saw an altar to an unknown God. He realized that this is an opening to explain to them his knowledge of the true and only God. He is clear in saying that in this regard they are operating in ignorance, and that he has the answer to fill in this gap in their understanding.

One abiding question that we almost all face at some point is the question of purpose, of why we're here, and what lasting significance our life has. People may be looking for a lasting source of hope, for overcoming their anxiety and fear. Others may be looking for the answer to relationship issues, such as challenges in marriage or with parenting.

Knowing the right questions to answer is really key. In our context, a lot of people are not living in a state of spiritual crisis, so we have to be patient, and listen more to figure out what matters to them and what questions they have. It requires knowing the people you are talking to, as we've just looked at. It also requires humility, that we don't come across as sounding

arrogant that we have figured everything out, and that we know everything. Our knowledge and understanding is incomplete, and developing, but we do have the source of truth to point people to learn from.

4) Correct misconceptions.

The philosophers did not think much initially of what Paul was saying. They called him a babbler, which literally means “seed picker”, and mean a loafer or worthless person. They thought of Paul as a wandering teacher who just picked up bits and pieces of info here and then and then presented himself as a learned person. Paul had to present his worldview clearly in a way to influence them and show them it was meaningful and coherent.

In answering questions, Paul also had to correct some aspects of their worldview that are false. The Greeks believed in their own ethnic and cultural superiority, above the barbarians around them, but Paul rejects this by pointing out that people have one common origin. In verse 26 he says, “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.” We are all created by God, made in God’s image, and thus we don’t have racial hierarchies. This is an argument we can use to combat the dangers of white supremacy we face today, and that we see lived demonstrated in hatred and attacks on minorities and people of color.

Relativism, the idea that truth can be different for each one of us, permeates our postmodern context, and can really shut down gospel communication completely if not properly countered. Paul’s speech in Acts 17 contains some helpful ways to establish universal applicability and relevance to all people. Since God is in control over our relative positions and boundaries, every nation has the same imperative of repentance and impending judgment. This will not convince all disciples of relatives, but a foundation such as this is essential to constructing an effective message that applies to all.

Paul does not merely equate his understanding of God with their prior uninformed worship as a matter of applying a label to a god with no name, but leaving their understanding and their worship unchanged. Instead, he uses that as a starting point to explain to them God’s power and dominion over the world and God’s authority over our life. One of the quotes that Paul makes is from the philosophy Aratus, who originally wrote this, “All ways are full of Zeus and all meeting places of men; the sea and all the harbors are full of him. In ever direction we all have to do with Zeus; for we are also his offspring.” Now clearly Paul does not believe in the worldview expressed by this quote, or in worshiping Zeus. He’s taking one part of what was said originally, and then using it to make the point that it is actually God who created the world and all of us. That brings me to the final lesson.

5) Lead to Jesus.

Start with what you have in common, but end with Jesus. Sometimes we may be very effective with establishing rapport and getting someone to listen to us, but then we don’t end up sharing anything significant. In calling the people to repent, Paul is saying that their current approach to religion and faith is not sufficient, and they need to make a U-turn. They need to turn away from their current belief systems to follow the resurrected Christ.

Given the brevity of the Lukan account of the speech, it is dangerous to “argue from silence” that since a particular element is not found within this speech that Paul did not include it. Luke only includes 14 sentences (in English), that would take about one minute and a half to say. That would be like a really short sermon, or even a short Ted talk. I believe it is very likely that Paul elaborated further than is present in the text. Thus, what we have is a summary or outline of Paul’s message, and not an exhaustive transcript. For example, the name of Jesus is not included in this section, but it is possible that Paul did invoke Jesus by name: we don’t know for sure. He does clearly reference Jesus by saying at the end of his message that God “will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

Repentance and the death/resurrection of Christ are non-negotiables in our proclamation of God, just as they were for Paul. They are as controversial and offensive today as they were then, yet cannot be trimmed for the sake of appeal. The shift from agreement to loving confrontation is pivotal, difficult, and when successfully accomplished highly rewarding. The brunt of our evangelistic and theological energy must be focused on two areas: (1) understanding the setting we are in, and (2) bringing the gospel imperative in local terminology and language with love and discernment. This is what Paul models for us at Mars Hill, and what we must do wherever we find ourselves.

I read a quote this week from the traveler and missionary David Livingstone, who was once asked where he was prepared to go. He said “I am prepared to go anywhere, so long as it is forward” (Barclay, *Acts of the Apostles*, 140). That is my desire for us as a church, as we continue to restart and in all that we do.

As we move forward, as more things reopen and more ministry opportunities become available to us, my desire is that we will continue to be empowered by God’s Spirit to break barriers, cross borders and point those around us to Jesus on a regular basis. I am excited to see how God will accomplish His purpose for Pathway as we continue to restart our ministries.

Acts 1:8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Matthew 20:18 Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”