

Viral – good news spreads fast

#9 Convincing sceptics

Acts 17:16-34



Intro

Have you ever had to deliver a speech before people you hardly know?

- Maybe you were the parent chosen to speak at your child's wedding
- Perhaps you had to represent your colleagues at a conference, or
- Maybe you had to speak at a book launch or charity gig

Speaking in public before an audience you've never met has forever been considered a scary and difficult task:

Jerry Seinfeld famously highlighted how people surveyed considered public speaking more scary than death.

Dorothy Sarnoff wisely suggested that you “make sure you've finished speaking before your audience has finished listening.”

And, Taylor Swift recommends that you make sure Kanye West is nowhere to be seen before you start your public address!

Paul in Athens – Acts 17:16-34

In our passage from The Book of Acts today, the apostle Paul is called upon to give a speech in defense of his Gospel before the world's great academics. The passage breaks up neatly into four sections as follows...

1. Paul mingles in the marketplace 16-18
2. Paul engages with the thinkers 19-21
3. Paul explains his worldview 22-31
4. The audience wants more 32-34

1. Paul mingles in the marketplace 16-18

Last week's episode of the adventures of Paul and friends (Acts 17:1-15) ended with Paul being whisked away from hostile objectors.

¹⁵ *Those escorting went with him all the way to Athens; then they returned to Berea with instructions for Silas and Timothy to hurry and join him.*

Paul arrived in Athens for the first time, most likely by sea (see vs 14).



Although this great city had lost its shine and significance somewhat by the 1st Century AD, it was still a free city (like Thessalonica and unlike Philippi), and still revered as a centre of learning and philosophy. In verses 16-18 we read...

¹⁶ *While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city.* ¹⁷ *He went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and he spoke daily in the marketplace to all who happened to be there.* ¹⁸ *He also had a debate with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. When he told them about Jesus and his resurrection, they said, "What's this babbling trying to say with these strange ideas he's picked up?" Others said, "He seems to be preaching about some foreign gods."*

Perhaps, like me, you've had the great privilege of walking the ancient ruins of the Athens agora. Luke tells us that after Paul's usual practice of

meeting with fellow Jewish people in the local synagogue he made his way to the marketplace.

Verse 16 tells us how deeply disturbed¹ he was to see a city so “swamped” by idols of worship. In those days the statues and shrines glistened in the sunlight.

In the great Parthenon at the highest point of the city stood a huge gold and ivory statue of Athena, visible from many kilometres away. One Roman satirist said it was easier to find a god (in Athens) than a man.²

Like Socrates centuries before him, Paul mingled in the marketplace in conversation and debate with anyone and everyone. In other words, he did what was completely acceptable and usual in that culture.

In the huge stoa³, Paul laid out his beliefs alongside those of the Epicureans and the Stoics⁴ as they spruiked their systems of thought to passers-by in the colonnade.

But they accused Paul of speaking rubbish. The word “babbling” in verse 18, could be used today of a bin chicken⁵ in down-town Sydney. Some thought he was trying to introduce new idols to the city.⁶

2. *Paul engages with the thinkers 19-21*

So, just like Socrates 450 years before, Paul was taken up to what the Romans called Mars Hill. On this small plateau between the agora and the acropolis, Paul was called to explain himself before the Athenian

¹ Paul’s feelings at the sight of many idols reminds some of God’s distress over idols in Isaiah 44

² Quoted from Xenophon. The city had temples, shrines, altars, statues more than any other, including images of Apollo, the city’s patron, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Bacchus, Neptune, Diana, Aesculapius. The whole Greek pantheon and all the gods of Olympus were there. The city glistened with gold, ivory, marble, brass and more.

³ A covered shopping mall

⁴ Stott says that Epicureans – philosophers of the garden – “considered the gods to be so remote as to take no interest in... human affairs.” Chance ruled and nothing lay beyond death. Stoics – philosophers of the porch – acknowledged a supreme god, but like a world soul. Fate, duty and self-sufficiency whatever the circumstances characterized their philosophy.

⁵ Like scavenging sparrows in the ancient gutter, our native white Ibis raiding rubbish bins today

⁶ “Jesus and his resurrection” in koine Greek sounded to them like two gods, “*Jesoun*” and “*Anastasis*”, the latter sounding like a goddess of healing.

academics. Paul's "judges" were like the Guardians of the galaxy of Greek thought...

¹⁹ Then they took him to the high council⁷ of the city. "Come and tell us about this new teaching," they said. ²⁰ "You are saying some rather strange things, and we want to know what it's all about." ²¹ (It should be explained that all the Athenians as well as the foreigners in Athens seemed to spend all their time discussing the latest ideas.)

The name "Areopagus" (meaning hill of Ares) was synonymous with the council itself, which may have also met in the stoa in those days. Yet the text suggests Paul was "taken", and many suggest that, as in past eras, the assembly of academics met to pronounce judgment upon new ideas on the hill itself.

3. *Paul explains his Gospel worldview 22-31*

I wonder how *you* would have begun Paul's speech if you were in his shoes?

Jon Stewart, of American TV fame, would urge him to begin with a joke. Can you imagine Paul kicking off his address with, "A deist, a pantheist, and a polytheist walk into a bar"?

Instead, in verses 22 and 23 Paul begins his speech with a reference to local knowledge he has picked up on beforehand...

"I notice that you are very religious in every way, for as I was walking along, I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: 'To an Unknown God.' This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I'm telling you about.

Some think Paul sounds sarcastic or superior here at the start of his speech. Yet, remember that he is on his own here. He is the minor voice, before local masters. Instead, Paul is making a connection with is

⁷ Unlike in the days of Socrates the council had little or no judicial powers

audience. He starts where his listeners are at.⁸ He appeals to their common yearning for what is otherwise a mystery but for the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.⁹

Once Paul had their attention, he explained his “strange” views in terms of a comparative worldview.¹⁰ In verses 24-31 we can look at Paul’s speech as if he is answering four timeless questions.

First, in verses 24-26 we can ask the question of our origins...

- I. Where do we come from? According to Paul’s Gospel we all come from the one true living God who made and sustains all that is...

²⁴ “He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn’t live in man-made temples, ²⁵ and human hands can’t serve his needs—for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. ²⁶ From one man¹¹ he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries.

- Paul’s views are in great contrast to Epicureans whose gods were so remote as to take no interest in human affairs.
- Paul’s view also differed from Stoics who believed in a supreme god, yet with a pantheistic view - a kind of impersonal ‘world soul’.¹¹
- So too, in a post-Christian era such as ours, we will find that our views of God as Creator and loving sustainer of life as revealed in the Bible may differ greatly from popular and academic views today (Why not make a list of comparative views on our origins in your city today?).

Secondly, we can ask of Paul’s speech about the meaning of life...

⁸ In the synagogues, Paul began with the common ground of the Scriptures, but didn’t necessarily agree with their views of them. Here, Paul chooses a common “text” from a Greek shrine, and though his views are different, he appeals to their common yearning as fellow humans as his starting point. Paul loved enough to listen to the locals. Paul even quotes a well-known Greek poet (Aratus) to connect their own sentiments with the beliefs he is introducing to them (vs. 28). If his opening words sound abrasive, remember that Greeks in Athens had great respect for debate and contending for ideas.

⁹ Colossians 1:27

¹⁰ This is my own idea applied to the text, using four age-old tests put to any philosophy or religion

¹¹ So says Stott in his commentary

II. Why are we here? In verses 27 and 28 Paul's Gospel says that the living God wants a relationship, wants community with people.

²⁷ "His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ For in him we live and move and exist. As some of your^{own} own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

- Again, what a contrast! This idea that the gods might love or want community with humans was anathema to Greeks in Athens. In their mythology, the gods often capriciously used humans to serve their own divine needs. Instead, Paul's Gospel says that the very reason we should live is that the God of Jesus Christ seeks us out for a relationship.¹²
- Today some of our neighbours may see the purpose of life in terms of their work, or family, or success, or wealth. Yet, they, like Paul's audience, may not know the Gospel's vision of a loving God who seeks a relationship with us at the very centre of life – where true meaning is found (Make a list of the various reasons to live that people cling to in your city).

Thirdly, we can ask of Paul's speech a question of ethics. That is...

III. How, then, should we live? In verses 29 and 30 Paul hints at freedom from their enslavement to idols of their own making.

²⁹ And since this is true, we shouldn't think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone. ³⁰ "God overlooked people's ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him.

- As we've seen in *The Book of Acts* so far, and in the associated *Letter to the Galatians*, Paul's Gospel was bringing about a social and spiritual revolution of freedom (e.g. Gal. 3:28). In Verse 29 Paul critiques the burdensome tyranny in Hellenistic culture of constantly having to manipulate the universe to find

¹² The great Westminster confession says: What is the chief end of [humanity]? A. [Humanity's] chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy [God] forever.

happiness, or success, or status. Paul's Gospel, by contrast, offers a life of assurance that God loves you, and a life lived by faith in the Living God of grace.¹³

- In verse 30, Paul speaks of the goodness of grace. In the current season, he says, God is forbearing toward all human failing. God calls everyone to change their mind about God and about life now (“repentance” – the Greek word ‘metanoia’).
- People today may misunderstand Christianity as a religion of duty, rules and behaviours (a burdensome life indeed). We should show, as Paul did, that the Gospel shifts the focus from our what goodness we have in us to the goodness of God graciously at work in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Sum up the misnomers your neighbours have about the Church and about the Gospel in your city).

Fourthly, we can ask of Paul's speech about destiny...

IV. Where are we going? In verse 31 Paul speaks of a “day” to come when God will bring about a truly just world.

³¹ For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead.”

- Paul says there a greater judge than even those on this council before him! The judge they should really be cognizant of is the one he is preaching - Jesus Christ, the resurrected one¹⁴ (the “man” God appointed).
- Our neighbours may think, as Epicureans did, that there is nothing beyond this life, so live large now and max out the pleasures of this world. Or like the Stoics they may believe we should grin and bear the pain of life as our lot and wear it as a badge of honour. But our Gospel points to a destiny quite

¹³ Note how just as Paul's Gospel offered freedom to Jews from burdensome laws of their own making, so too here freedom from burdensome systems of thought and practice is a feature

¹⁴ Luke's record is a summary. “Jesus and his resurrection” captures what was a more detailed Gospel presentation (e.g. v18)

different – a new life now with the help of God’s Spirit, and a world to come of peace and harmony in God’s re-creation (What are some of the common views of the future of humanity in your neighbourhood?).

4. *The audience wanted more 32-34*

Every public address is judged ultimately by the response of the audience. How, then, did the council of thinkers react to Paul?

³² When they heard Paul speak about the resurrection of the dead, some laughed in contempt, but others said, “We want to hear more about this later.” ³³ That ended Paul’s discussion with them, ³⁴ but some joined him and became believers. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the council, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

- As Paul saw earlier in Lystra (Acts 14), it was easy for people of the Greek culture to misinterpret his Gospel.¹⁵ Hence the need for Paul to explain himself so carefully.
- Luke once again points to the Gospel as a continuing social revolution by referring to the conversion of a distinguished Gentile council member and a prominent woman, both considered “outsiders” by Paul’s Jewish critics in other cities.¹⁶

Explaining ourselves to others today

I don’t imagine you will be called upon to speak to a council of academics to defend your beliefs today. Yet we often engage in conversation with people who have little or no knowledge of the true Gospel today.

For example, I was speaking with a young woman recently who asked some questions about my church. In just a brief time of conversation I learned three things that made her tick i) concern for the planet, ii) dignity for all people, and

¹⁵ Dr. Conrad Gempf – in Lystra they thought Paul was talking about two old gods when he spoke of Jesus and his resurrection (Gk. Anastasis). Here in Athens some thought he was introducing two new gods!

¹⁶ Women were not normally welcome before the council perhaps indicating perhaps the unusual commotion caused by Paul or his earlier witnessing in the marketplace. Some commentators like to assess Paul’s preaching as unsuccessful in Athens, but this need not be the assessment, given the absence of biblical background, the amazing converts Luke lists, and the desire expressed by some in the council to hear more.

iii) the enjoyment of searching for inner peace. Sadly, I soon discovered that she had no idea that Christianity might have something to say about these core values she held dear.

Paul's example in Acts 17 inspires us to take the time to listen to the locals with love; to research the views in our own marketplace just as Paul learned what it was that made people in the city of Athens tick.

Like Paul, we should...

- seek common ground with the people we meet as a natural expression of love for God's creation.
- take the opportunity to share our Gospel hope in life if it's given.
- Speak from the heart of the life-changing grace of God we know in Jesus.

Conclusion

Even if it's not a formal speech you are called to give, here's two final pieces of advice from experienced public speakers to close...

The late Maya Angelou, poet and civil rights activist said...



And, former presidential candidate, now author on spiritual health, Marianne Williamson says...



Steve Webster, August 2020