

The sermon

Intro

Jesus is unique. He's more than a good moral teacher. He's more than one useful religious guru among many. Interestingly Jewish sources affirm that Jesus performed miracles (Babylonian Talmud). But they attribute his powers to demonic sources. There's the empty tomb and the resurrection. No other religious figure in history has an authentication that gives credibility to their claims. Jesus does. There's the church. Converts spread throughout the globe. From all tribes, tongues, and nations. Conversion that isn't imposed by the state or coerced through law or the product of cultural conformity. A simple message about a cross produced worshippers throughout the globe.

Is there a basis for Christianity? Paul says there is. He points to the resurrection.

Body

Passage Focus

Acts is the account of the numerical growth and geographical spread of the early church.

It's the story of Jesus building his church (Matt 16:18). It's the story of Jesus exercising his authority from heaven. It's the story of his disciples obeying the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20). It's the story of "*the smallest of all seeds*" growing into a large tree (Matt 13:32).

Point 1: A stirred heart leads to gospel conversations (17:16-18)

READ 17:16-18

"waiting for them" = Silas and Timothy. As Paul tours Athens, apparently alone, his heart (spirit) is provoked.

Provoked = inward distress, upset. Grief or righteous anger or a desire to see lost Athenians saved from the wrath to come or all three.

What he saw was a "**city...full of idols.**" Meaning there were a lot of statues dedicated to the worship of manmade gods. Historian Pliny the Elder (AD 23/24-79) in his *Natural History* noted that Athens had "no fewer" than 73,000 statues. Images and altars were dedicated to the likes of Zeus, Athena, Aphrodite, Apollo, Artemis, Eros, Nike, and Caesar Augustus.

This disturbed Paul's heart.

"So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons"

So he talked with these people about Jesus. As a result of exiles in 722, 605, 597, 586 BC, Jewish people made their way to Athens in 4th century BC. The Jewish population was significant such that they had their own synagogues.

"devout persons" = God-fearers = Gentiles who were attracted to the Jewish faith and attended synagogue services.

Paul's pattern was to enter the synagogue and reason "*with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and rise from the dead*" (Acts 17:2-3).

"and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there."

Paul was there for a period of time.

Marketplace = the center of public life, business center, public square, main street, where the people were.

Epicureans and Stoics

- 1) Two contrasting Greek worldviews.
- 2) Epicureans believed that the world came to be through a random movement of atoms, that the gods don't intervene in human affairs, and that the purpose of life is pleasure through the absence of disturbances and pain.
- 3) Stoics believed that everything happens according to providence or fate for the good of the world meaning there is no such thing as evil. That passions and emotions like fear and grief are wrong attitudes towards divine providence. And that happiness consists of using reason to make those choices which are best for us.

Application

My point is Paul conversed with diverse viewpoints. The Jews rejected Jesus and denied the resurrection. The Greeks had erroneous ideas about God. Paul engaged these people in conversations about Jesus.

We face diverse worldviews today. Christian cults like Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses. People who believe evolution explains existence. People with gender ideologies that reject Genesis 1. People who think the existence of evil disproves God. We're called to converse with these people about spiritual matters.

Paul entered the world of Athens. He didn't hide out in a bunker waiting for the world to end.

Resurrection

The content of Paul's proclamation was "*Jesus and the resurrection.*"

Who Jesus was. The Son of God. What Jesus did. He died on the cross as a substitute for sinners such that whoever believes can have eternal life. That God the Father authenticated the work of God the Son on the cross with the resurrection.

Point 2: Opportunity presents itself (17:19-21)

READ 17:19-21

What's going on here is Paul is being invited before the authorities of Athens to present his case for the right of Christian worship to be granted by the city. It's like an opportunity to stand before Palermo Consolidated School schoolboard to argue for the legitimacy of a Bible club in the school.

- 1) "Aeropagus" (17:19) indicates either a location in the marketplace or a council that dealt with ethical and religious matters or both.
- 2) In 17:34, "*Dionysus the Areopagite*" indicates this man was a part of the council/court that met on what's now called Mars Hill.
- 3) There's a 4th century BC account of Socrates being indicted for "rejecting the gods" and "bringing in strange deities" (Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, 1.1.1, 4th century BC).
- 4) Approximately 40 years after this event Jewish historian Josephus speaks of a recent event whereby a "certain priestess" was executed to having "introduced a strange god" because "one of their laws" forbid such activity (*Against Apion*, 2.262-68, quoting from 2.267).

The council was determining whether or not Paul was bringing a new deity into the city. In 17:18, he's "*a preacher of foreign deities.*" In 17:19, it's a "*new teaching.*" In 17:20, "*you bring strange things to our ears.*"

"Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new." – 17:21

That culture loved to discuss ideas. The council didn't want new deities introduced.

Application

When we have gospel conversations responses will vary. It will be new to some, it will be useless babble to others, it will be strange to others, it will be confusing to others. Some will want to hear further. Some will be stimulated by the new ideas. Be ready for a variety of responses.

Point 3: The Giver and Sustainer of life (17:22-26)

READ 17:22-26

"Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious." – 17:22

That's respectful dialogue rather than insult. You care about worship. Like saying to a Catholic, "I see you take your faith very seriously."

For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.'

The man who distressed by idols doesn't jump on them with abrasive speech. He makes a connection. During his travels he found an altar devoted *"To the unknown god."*

Some of you aren't sure and have questions.

"What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."

I have answers. Let me tell you who the unknown God is.

[Jesus isn't a new deity. He's the unknown God!]

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, – 17:24

Paul speaks basic Christian beliefs. God made the world, the land, the waters, the animals, humans. God isn't limited to temples made by men because he's omnipresent (spiritually everywhere).

nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. – Acts 17:25

God isn't served by ceremonies, sacrifices, buildings, and statues. God needs nothing from us because he gives us life, he sustains our life, and he gives us the raw materials and the intellect to exercise the rule he delegated to us at creation.

God wasn't lacking before creation in such a way that he needed us to complete the lack he found in himself. God created us not from lack, but from a desire to display his perfections.

We're the ones who lack, not God. God doesn't need us. It's the other way around.

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, – Acts 17:26

From Adam God has brought forth all the nations of the world. God determines who lives where and when. That's a hands on God. Some agreement with the Stoics.

[This isn't the introduction of a new god. This is the God the Jews worship in their synagogues.]

In saying one God created everyone, Paul's rejecting the competing gods of Greek mythology.

Application

Gospel conversations aren't limited to sin, the cross, and belief. Sometimes we need to bring creation and the nature of God into the conversation.

Point 4: Made to seek and find God (17:27-29)

READ 17:27-29

that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.

Why were we created? Why do we exist? To seek God. That's to desire God and search after him. The goal isn't a never-ending search. The goal is finding the one true God and embracing him through faith. God wants the search to end. God wants us to respond to what we find. God wants us settling on the truth, not trying out every new idea.

In *Confessions*, the spiritual autobiography of his conversion, Augustine writes:

“Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you. He bears about him the mark of death, the sign of his own sin, to remind him that you *thwart the proud*. But still, since he is part of your creation, he wishes to praise you. The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”

Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring."

God isn't hard to find. He's close by. Your own writers support my claim.

Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. – 17:29

We come from God. God doesn't come from us. Your gods you manufacture are your own creation, not God.

Application

Paul mixes affirmation, agreement, explanation, and critique in his case.

Without biblical revelation, the Greeks were ignorant and committed idolatry. We need the Bible to know God! Idolatry is manmade religion. We commit idolatry today when we fashion a god to suit our own desires. “I'd prefer to think of God in this way. God can't be like this.” The Bible reveals who God is. We need to let the Bible correct our misconceptions!

Point 5: Repentance grounded in the resurrection (17:30-31)

READ 17:30-31

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, – 17:30

Times of ignorance = in the years before the gospel went to the nations God “*allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways*” (Acts 14:16). Overlooked = God withheld judgment on sin. But now Jesus is building his church and the gospel is making demands on everyone, not just the Jews.

Repent = 360 degree turn, an about face, going in the opposite direction. Turning from rebellion to trust in Jesus death and resurrection. Turning from sin to learn from Jesus and follow his ways.

If you're asking, how do I connect with God? How do I relate to God? It's not through superstition or looking inside yourself. It's through repentance.

because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. – 17:31

God as holy ruler of his creation holds us his creatures accountable for our actions. A future day of judgment is this day of accountability. Sin won't be overlooked forever. Yeah God isn't indifferent to evil. The day of judgment is the return of Christ at the end of this age.

On that day every sin ever committed by humanity will be accounted for. Those who've repented and placed their faith in Jesus will be pardoned. Because Jesus took their punishment on the cross. Those who've never repented will be punished. They will be punished in the form of eternal conscious torment in a place called hell whose residents experience "*weeping and gnashing of teeth.*"

What Paul's saying here is the resurrection of Jesus proves the day of judgment and our need to repent. When Jesus was raised, the Father authenticated Jesus' death on the cross. When Jesus was raised, all his claims, whether claims that he's the Son of God or he's coming again in judgment or eternal life is conferred on sinners through belief in him, all these claims were vindicated. All he said was true. The resurrection is the proof! The message we proclaim is always relevant because the resurrection happened!

The gospel, the good news is repent so you'll escape judgment and have eternal life. Your sins can be forgiven by a merciful Savior. You can have newness of life to fight sin today.

Resurrection proofs

1) Eyewitness testimony.

Normal legal procedure is to accept eyewitness accounts unless proven false. How else could we know what happened in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago?

Presenting unfavorable details of early leaders like Peter suggests authenticity. Deceivers don't highlight their faults.

Women are presented as key eyewitnesses at a time when the witness of women wasn't valued. If deception was intended, this didn't help their cause.

In the gospels the resurrection events are presented in diverse ways with each eyewitness adding their own details. A rehearsed conspiracy/lie wouldn't allow for this diversity.

2) The empty tomb.

Jewish authorities didn't have Jesus' body. All they had to do was produce Jesus' body to end Christianity.

All read for us the story the Jewish leaders spread after the empty tomb.

If the disciples stole the body, why weren't they arrested?

How could Roman guards fall asleep when the punishment for failure was likely death?

If the soldiers were asleep, how did they know what happened to the body and who took it?

How did the soldiers remain asleep while the tomb was disturbed?

The evidence suggests the disciples had no opportunity to steal and there was great motive to maintain the body, yet the Jewish leadership couldn't produce the body!

3) Persecution endured

Assuming the body was stolen, why would disciples subject themselves to persecution, and even death, for something they knew to be false? Early believers were executed for their faith. People don't die for claims they know to be hoaxes. No disciple gave up the "hoax" when threatened with death.

But what stirs us to follow Jesus isn't resurrection proofs. It's an understanding of our sin and brokenness. It's an understanding of the mercy of God in Christ on the cross.

Point 6: Responses will vary (17:32-34)

READ 17:32-34

Some mocked Paul's address. Others wanted further conversation. Some believed and joined themselves to Paul.

Everyone responds to the gospel. How are you responding?

What do you do if you believe? You join with others who believe. You join a local church. That's one thing a person does after belief.