

Paul in Athens: Evangelism in a Post-Christian Culture (Part 4)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 July 2023

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] Well, friends, we are in a series, this is the last week of the series, that we are in looking! at Acts chapter 17, and we're looking at Paul's ministry in Athens. And Athens, as we have said, is a lot like Washington, D.C. It was a very religiously pluralistic place. It was a center for intellectualism. A lot of the most well-educated people in the region lived in Athens. They gravitated there. It was a cultural center. And so, a lot like D.C. And Paul has been invited at this point in the story to come and essentially give a kind of TED Talk at Harvard University, so to speak, or Oxford. He's been invited to present the gospel at the Areopagus, which is this rocky outcrop where all of the philosophical elites would gather to discuss the various competing worldviews in the age. And so, Paul is invited to make the case for Christ.

And we come to this moment, it's kind of a climactic moment, and recognize that this is Paul's big moment. This is his big chance. Everybody gets quiet, they listen, and he begins to lay out the case for Christ. And we looked at, last week, the content of his message. And this week, we're going to look at the way people respond. And what we're going to see is that there are three general categories of response to Paul. And those map onto the three general categories of response that we see more broadly.

And... Paul didn't have a microphone.

phone? And now neither do I. I'll use this one. So anyway, Paul is invited to present, and we're going to see his responses. There are three general categories of response, and each of the ways that we see people in Athens responding to Paul are the ways that we will always see people respond whenever they hear the gospel. So three general categories of response.

We're going to look at these, and I invite you as we are looking at these ways of responding to the gospel. I invite you to reflect on your own heart, your own life, to ask, how have I responded to the gospel? So let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you that it has a power independent of our preaching or our human wisdom, that your word is the way through which you do your work in us. And we pray, Lord, that as we open your word together, that you would guide us and lead us and ultimately do your work in us, that we might encounter the living word, Jesus Christ, and become more like him, Lord. We pray that you would do this for our good and for your glory.

[3 : 27] In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. So here's the first category of response that we see to Paul's preaching, verse 32. Now, when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. We get to recognize here, we got probably the greatest church planter who's ever lived. This man has seen Jesus face to face.

He is theologically and rhetorically brilliant. He is filled with the Holy Spirit. And he gets laughed out of the room. They don't even let him finish his sermon before they start mocking and deriding what he's saying. So he has no other option but to turn around and walk out.

And, you know, it's instructive to us because I think there are a lot of people who live in this day and age who assume that the people who came before us, the people who lived 2,000 years ago, were much less sophisticated. They were much more superstitious. They were much more gullible and because of those things, something like a claim of resurrection, a lot more people would buy it because they were just less sophisticated than we are in the 21st century. And this is something that C.S. Lewis famously called chronological snobbery. And the truth is that from the very beginning, people have mocked and ridiculed the claims of Christianity. We see that going all the way back to the Apostle Paul getting laughed out of the room. And especially in a place like Athens, the idea of resurrection went directly against the founding charter of the Areopagus. Traditionally,

the god Apollo inaugurated the court of the Areopagus. And when he did, he made this declaration, quote, when a man dies and his blood is spilled on the ground, there is no resurrection.

That's in the founding charter of the Areopagus. So Paul is directly challenging one of the founding principles upon which the Areopagus and everything it represented was built. So no wonder people mock him.

But let's imagine that's not the case. Let's imagine that there was nothing specifically against the idea of resurrection. Let's imagine that we're in another place. Regardless of when and where you might be, there will always be some people who immediately reject the claims of the gospel when they first hear them. And for some people, this is simply a spiritual block. We know that the Lord needs to open the hearts of people to hear and respond to the gospel. But along with that, in general, it's important for us to recognize, especially those of us who desire to, and I hope we all do, share our faith with people around us who don't know the Lord. One of the things we have observed about human nature is that in general, people have a very hard time changing their mind. People have a hard time changing their mind.

[6 : 30] When you have a settled way of thinking about things, that creates a sense of peace. You kind of know how the pieces fit together. You have a settled worldview, a settled way of seeing things. And then when you're presented with new information or evidence that challenges those presuppositions, that causes a lot of anxiety. Because all of a sudden, everything is kind of up in the air, it causes what we call cognitive dissonance. Where you have thoughts over here that are not in harmony with thoughts over here and thoughts over here. And all of a sudden, there's a lot of internal stress caused by that cognitive dissonance.

And so because of that, some people respond by doubling down on their original position. They double down. It's called the backfire effect. So you present people with a strong argument and evidence that challenges their views, but instead of changing their mind, they become more entrenched in their original position. And there was a big study, a kind of meta-analysis done in 2019 on this effect. And what they found is that with more neutral issues, you don't really see this effect that much. With more neutral issues, people are more likely to change their minds in the face of strong evidence. The key is, if you're dealing with issues that are more closely linked to identity, such as political or religious or moral ideas, that is where you see the backfire effect most strongly pronounced. And whenever we are engaging with people across lines of difference, whenever you're talking to people and there's a difference in views and you're dealing with topics that are political or moral or religious, it's incredibly important that you keep in mind, you are not just having an intellectual debate. People on both sides are having to manage their own internal stress and anxiety that is being caused by cognitive dissonance. For most all of us, just being open to the possibility that you might be wrong on anything causes an enormous amount of discomfort. So Paul comes in and he's claiming that Jesus was resurrected. That runs directly against the worldview that was held by many of his listeners. And so that causes an enormous amount of cognitive dissonance.

And so some of these people double down and they become more certain and more sure than ever that there's no possibility of resurrection and they can't even let him finish and they mock him and they drive him out. So for those of us who are contending for the gospel, some people are immediately going to shut down.

And don't think that you can talk them through or convince them or present more evidence. That's really not what's going on. They're trying to manage the storm of anxiety that this is causing inside. And many times you just have to accept you're not going to change that person's mind anytime soon.

[9 : 46] So some people mock and immediately reject Paul's message. The next response is very interesting. We go on to read, others said, we will hear you again about this. Now it's possible that some of these people are genuinely curious and that's probably the case. I mean, certainly there are legitimate reasons why people would want to discuss and investigate the claims of Christianity more.

And I would always tell anyone who is exploring Christianity, you should ask all the hard questions. You should not be afraid to investigate these claims. Christianity does not ask people to take a blind leap of faith. It's a faith that's actually based on strong evidence and eyewitness testimony.

It has a rich intellectual tradition spanning 2,000 years. Some of history's greatest thinkers have been faithful followers of Jesus. So I would always encourage people, if you're genuinely wanting to

investigate this, you should. There's a lot there. But a lot of commentators read this response from the Athenians more as a form of procrastination. In other words, they're putting off what they really believe about Jesus as long as they can. And I think that there are a lot of reasons why a person would be tempted to procrastinate. We live in a culture that prizes open-mindedness. I heard one professor lamenting his students and how there is a kind of overwhelming cynicism that pervades. His students are so afraid to appear earnest or that they might genuinely be passionate about or believe something because they're afraid that they will be mocked and outed as being intellectually unsophisticated.

And so there's a kind of cynical open-mindedness that says we can't ever really be sure about anything that holds sway and masquerades as intellectual sophistication. And so people on the issue of religion on something like the truth of the gospel believe that if they remain perpetually open-minded about everything, that that is the most secure place to be. You'll never be seen as being naive or having been taken in by something. You know, the words of G.K. Chesterton come to mind where he famously said, an open mind is like an open mouth. It's meant to be shut again on something solid.

And, you know, if you're never prepared to close your mouth on something solid, you'll ultimately experience spiritual starvation. And your mind is the same way. If you always ask questions, never prepared to receive an answer, you're going to experience, eventually, starvation.

[12:50] So that's one reason potentially why people might procrastinate, the desire to remain open-minded and appear intellectually sophisticated. Another reason, I believe, is that some people think that as long as they don't have strongly held convictions, they can't be held accountable to those convictions.

Because once you say you believe something, then you're accountable to that thing. And over the years, I have seen many, many people hover right on the edge of faith for years and years and years. These are people I love, people with whom I've had long conversations, people for whom I have great respect. But I've seen people hover right on the edge of faith for years and years and years.

They clearly feel compelled by the truth of Jesus and the gospel, but they will never step fully into faith because they know that it means that things will begin to change in their life.

So they're not willing to let that happen. And what you begin to realize is the real obstacle for such a person is not intellectual. So again, no amount of evidence is going to make a dent. The real obstacle is control. These are people who would prefer to stay in control, to not have to surrender their lives to something or someone greater. And so they are incentivized to hover right on the edge of faith. So there are a number of incentives to procrastinate where people never really decide what they believe and commit to it. But I think that we need to understand that if we respond this way to something like the gospel, we are deeply misunderstanding the nature of the gospel message.

Because say, if you go to a wine tasting and somebody says, you know, I think the Pinot is better than the Cab, you might say, well, thanks for the input. I'll consider it and I'll decide what I think about it and what my opinion is. And there's no incentive to do that anytime soon. You can go the rest of your life and never really be sure if you like Pinot or

Cabernet more and you're okay. You'll survive and do just fine. But if somebody calls and says, your house is on fire, or if the bank calls and says, your mortgage payment is late, or if somebody calls and says, you've just won the lottery and you only have so many days to reply. See, that kind of message is fundamentally different. You wouldn't in any of those cases say, well, you know, that's your opinion and I'm just going to take some time and decide what I think. That kind of message demands a response. So if you understand what the gospel message is saying, it's saying the God of the universe made you and loves you beyond all comprehension. And he has now made it possible for you to know him intimately, to be forgiven for all the ways that you've rebelled against him and to become part of the new creation for all eternity, to be renewed from the inside out. So that's the gospel message. So either it's not true and you shouldn't do anything, or it is true and it changes everything.

[16:11] But if you understand the nature of the message, there is no third option that says, spend the next 10 years of your life on the periphery taking that into consideration. You know, Paul says, the times of ignorance God overlooked, but now is the time to decide. And that brings us to the third response, which is the response of faith. And these two converts that we learn about in verse 34 are wonderful examples of this. As Paul starts to walk away, it says in verse 34, some men joined

him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

And so we're told about some men who leave with Paul and then we're told about two converts by name, Dionysius the Areopagite. This is the equivalent of someone who's on the faculty of Harvard or Oxford.

Right? So Dionysius is somebody who is highly respected. He is a scholar in first century Athenian terms. And then Damaris is a woman who we can only imagine must have been a very high status to be allowed in the Areopagus, where most of the time women were not allowed. And the fact that these two people are mentioned by name strongly suggests that they were well-known and respected, if not leaders, in the church that formed in Athens after Paul's ministry. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, they're both held up as saints and celebrated for that reason. So these people, including these two that are mentioned by name, hear Paul's message and they respond with faith. So what is Paul's message? Well, it's the same message that Jesus preached during his earthly ministry. And it has two parts, repent and believe. Repent and believe. In modern English, you know, we say, I believe something. And what we mean by that often is, you know, I think that's true. It's intellectual assent. But in the New Testament, the word *pistou* is far richer. It doesn't just mean that you assent to facts being true. It means entrusting yourself. Entrusting yourself. It's even used sometimes to describe entrusting yourself to another person. So when you say, I believe something, *pistou*, you're saying, I entrust myself to this. So that's the difference between saying, I believe that this chair can hold my weight and actually sitting down in the chair. One is an opinion. The other is a commitment. And if believing means entrusting yourself to someone, what that means is that you have to turn away from the things that you used to trust and rely on. And that's really what the word repentance means. So when Jesus says, repent and believe the gospel, he's not inviting us simply to nod our heads to a creed. He's saying, you need to turn away from every lesser trust.

Your achievements, the control you believe you have over your life or the people around you or the future, the idols, the things that you have built your life on. He says, you need to turn away from every lesser trust. Every other thing that you look to give you peace and security as you lay down at night to go to sleep. Every other thing that you live for that you can't imagine your life without.

[19 : 59] And throw yourself entirely into his arms. In other words, to believe in Christ is to trust him to bear the weight of your life. I believe that this person can bear the weight of my life.

To entrust your past, your present, and your future to him and to follow him. If you remember the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, some of you know I love this illustration. There's a powerful illustration of repentance. And I pull it out every few years because it bears repeating. At the end of the movie, there's this chasm that is opened in the ground and Indiana Jones is hanging over the chasm. And his father is holding him by one hand, but with the other hand, he's reaching out trying to grab the grail. So if you can imagine, he's hanging like this and the grail is just out of reach. And he's just struggling and trying to reach out for the grail. And he keeps saying, I've almost got it. I've almost got it. I've almost got it.

And his hand is slipping. And we know as the audience that if he keeps reaching for it, he's going to lose his grip and he's going to plummet into the chasm. And so his father very calmly speaks his name. And he says in a very calm and loving voice, Indiana, let it go.

And then Indy stops reaching out for the cup and he turns and he looks into his father's eyes. And then he reaches up and he takes his father's hand and his father pulls him out.

And in my opinion, it's probably one of the best illustrations of repentance in pop culture. Every single one of us sins because we are constantly tempted to pursue things, to worship things, to give our allegiance to things other than God. And often these are good things that we've just allowed to become too important. But we all have kind of holy grails in our lives, like things that we are reaching for that we believe are the thing that we most need, like security or comfort or affirmation. And eventually, pursuing those things instead of God will ultimately lead to our demise. And so repentance means listening to the voice of our father who is calling us each by name in a calm and gentle and loving voice and responding to his invitation, let it go. The things that we're pursuing instead of him. And it means turning around and taking his hand and trusting him to bear us up. That's repentance. So think back for a moment to the second group, the procrastinators, the people who we said ultimately are procrastinating, not for intellectual reasons necessarily, but possibly because they want to stay in control of their lives. The barrier really here, now that we understand

this, is that they don't want to repent.

[23 : 06] They don't want to have to let it go. They want to, many times, have both. I want to have a little bit of Jesus in my life. I want to have a little bit of faith. And I also want to have the things that I most want. And it keeps you in this state of perpetual uncertainty and uncommitment and ultimately spiritually hungry. They want to stay in control. You know, there's a guy in the news this week.

Some of you may know who I'm talking about. He's the CEO of a tech company. You know exactly what I'm talking about. And he's been having an affair, it's such a cliché, with a woman from his company, head of HR or something like that. And they're at a Coldplay concert and they get out the kiss cam and they're pointing it at different people. And all of a sudden, they come over to this couple and they look up and they realize that they're on the jumbotron.

And they're horrified. And they start scrambling, trying to hide. You know, the woman just turns around and the guy just sort of awkwardly just kind of lays down on the ground. And of course, you know, people have pointed out that it's their attempts to hide that outed them. You know, if they just played it cool, probably nobody would have known. But the more they try to hide, the more guilty they look. And of course, the internet has done its thing.

And this man's poor wife wakes up to thousands of messages on her Facebook page, I think, outing her husband as a cheater. And people are tearing him to shreds and mocking him. And I mean, it's a feeding frenzy. You know, you see that. And I just, I don't know if this thought struck you, but I mean, you know, imagine what it would be like to have your sin projected up on a jumbotron. You know, you think you're there. He made some comment about we should be able to expect some measure of privacy. And I can't believe you outed us, you know.

But imagine if that was you. And imagine if your sin was just put on display on a jumbotron for everybody to see. Here's the thing. He probably thinks this is the worst thing that could have happened to him. Spiritually speaking, this could be the best thing that ever happened to him.

[25 : 30] This could be the moment that changes everything in this man's life. Because the truth is out there. His sin is on display. And if we know anything about us, it's just the tip of the iceberg.

No more hiding. No more self-deception. No more deceiving his company and his wife and his kids. And no more lying. It's all out there. And imagine if a man like that allowed this to drive him to his knees, to humble him. Imagine if it drove him to repent, to cry out to Jesus for mercy because he's not finding it anywhere else. Imagine if he cried out and imagine if he fell into the arms of Jesus. This could completely change his life. We could see a guy like this 10 years from now looking back and saying, that was the best thing that ever happened to me. Because I was exposed. Because here's the thing.

God sees our hearts. To him, it's like all of our sin. Not just the affair that we might be having, but all of it is on display like a big jumbotron. Right? And from God's perspective, the more we try to hide, the more ridiculous we look. And the more guilty we look. But here's where the gospel differs. The gospel says that unlike the internet mob, God doesn't delight when people are publicly shamed.

[26 : 58] He doesn't delight in people being exposed and ridiculed. You know, God doesn't laugh at us. God doesn't mock. When God sees our sin, it breaks his heart.

God doesn't. And Jesus is willing to suffer and to die to cover our shame. Not to magnify it. And he does that because God ultimately wants us to be forgiven.

And he wants us to be restored. And he wants us to be with him. God sees who he created us to be. And he wants to restore us to that original glory and purpose.

That's the invitation of the gospel. God sees who he's forgiven. So these are the three responses that Paul gets in Athens. And for those of us who are Christians, who are hoping to see culture renewed, this passage, I think, helps level set. It helps manage our expectations.

There will always be people who mock. That's okay. There will always be people who reject it. There will always be people who procrastinate. And in those two categories, most likely we're not dealing ultimately with intellectual objections.

[28 : 13] It's something deeper. But then there will always be people like Dionysius. There will always be people like Damaris.

There will always be people around us. The people we might least expect whose hearts at that very moment are being open to the truth of the gospel. And all they need is for someone to share it with them.

And imagine if Paul had quit because of the mockery or the procrastination. If he had quit, he never would have seen these people come to faith.

And there might never have been a church in Athens. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you that you are at work in our midst. And 99% of it we cannot see. But you are doing things that go beyond what we can ask or even imagine.

[29 : 10] I pray that we would have eyes of faith. To trust and to know that. And to respond accordingly. That you would give us boldness and wisdom and insight.

Lord, I pray that for those who may hear this who are on the fence. Or who have closed themselves to the possibility of you, Lord.

I pray that your Holy Spirit would do what no human can do. Would open those hearts. And make that truth known. And sink it deep. We pray this in Jesus' holy name.

Amen. Amen.