

Acts 17:16-21: A Setting for Gospel Work

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[0 : 0 0] We find ourselves today in Acts 17. I'm going to be reading from verse 16 all the way through to the end of the chapter.

Although the sermon today will center on 16 through 21. Next week we will look at 22 to the end.

Acts 17 verse 16. Now, while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him.

As he saw that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, what does this babblers wish to say? Others said, he seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities.

[1 : 1 2] Because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus saying, May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting.

For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know, therefore, what these things mean. Now, all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.

For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription to the unknown God. What, therefore, you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you, the God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods in the boundaries of their dwelling place that they should seek God in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him.

[2 : 5 6] Yet he is actually not very far from each one of us. 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.

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, the times of ignorance God overlooked.

But now, he commands all people, everywhere, to repent, 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. Now, when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked.

But others said, we will hear you again about this. So Paul went out from their midst, but some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius, the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

[4 : 21] This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Well, last week, Pastor Jay opened our summer series entitled Celebrating Our Life in the Gospel by likening God's great gospel to a jewel, a precious stone, a gem.

And with pathos, it almost appeared that he held it before us in his very hand that we might see it. And he reminded us that the glorious setting for this great gospel was nothing less than the human heart.

What a great encouragement and comfort it is to all who believe. And the chances are that at least for those of you who are Christians here in our midst today, more than likely you were raised in a setting, just as the gospel needs a setting, a setting conducive to that gospel.

Which has me thinking about others in our midst here today and scores who have not yet entered into this church or any church, those whose life setting has little if any heritage in the Christian faith.

What does it take for the human heart to become properly fixed as a setting for God's gospel?

[6 : 14] Think about it. the world in which we live is growing up in a very different setting than the western world of even, say, a hundred years ago.

Is the gospel strong enough, capable even, of finding a resting place in today's world?

world. It's a worthy question. Perhaps you're asking it for yourself here this afternoon. And what must the church, as it is presently constructed, know about its own setting?

And how must the church, in its present construction, change if it is to see God's great gospel become set like a stone in this world, in this city, in this neighborhood, among family, friends, those even among us.

Tim Keller is a present-day Presbyterian pastor in the midst of Manhattan.

[7 : 41] And he put these issues squarely before the broader church in a brief article entitled The Missional Church. I want to read just a couple of things from the opening page.

He writes, quote, the British missionary Leslie Newbigin went to India around 1950. There, he was involved with a church living in mission in a very non-Christian culture.

When he returned to England some 30 years later, he discovered that now the Western Church too existed in a non-Christian society.

here's the key, but it had not yet adapted to its new situation. Later, he goes on, in conservative regions, it is still possible to see people profess faith and the church grow without becoming missional.

Most traditional evangelical churches still can only win people to Christ who are temperamentally traditional and conservative.

[9 : 02] Listen to how he closes. Eventually, evangelical churches ensconced in the declining remaining enclaves of Christendom will have to learn how to become missional and if it does not do that, it will decline or die.

Those are strong words. important words. Words, really, about the life and death of individual congregations that profess the Christian faith.

And so it appears to me in the midst of this summer as we gather week in and week out to celebrate our life in the gospel, we ought to be thinking clearly and deeply about the setting in which we live and its implications for the gospel.

I mean, let me put it as simply as I can. In the fall, we hope to preach through the opening chapters of the book of Joshua, which is a people of God who are on the move.

! My goodness, according to Keller, we better know where we're going and what the context is like or we will have little ability to remain Christian.

[10 : 30] And so we turn to Acts 17. Luke's telling of Paul in Athens.

The text that we just read divides nicely between a setting in verses 16 and 21 and the actual speech that Luke forwards for us in 22 to the end.

And I would like to take those very headers as our own to look this week at this setting and discern what it means for us and the life in the gospel and drive home some lessons as we hope to become a church that is vibrant and understanding our context.

Now, the first observation I want you to see from the text is an encouraging one. It's one that Luke preserves for us for he presents to us the notion that the city itself is a setting for this gospel narrative.

Look at the opening verse, chapter 17, verse 16. Now, while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that in that city it was full of idols.

[11 : 56] The city. It's nice to see that cities can be a setting for his gospel. After all, until this section in Luke's gospel, more broadly speaking from chapters 16 through 18, whenever the gospel was that moved in Luke's gospel into a Gentile world, it was predominantly moving in rural settings, not city settings.

Think of the early advance, chapter 8, verse 1, into Samaria, where the church was scattered throughout that region. Those are the words Luke gives to us.

Or Philip, in his journey in Acts 8, 26, when he was on the road to Gaza, and Luke writes these words that he was, this is a desolate place.

Think even beyond those early days to the first missionary journey, where they set sail for Cyprus, a relatively isolated island.

And they move up through the Centris River, out of Antioch, Pisidia, into Iconium, and Lystra, and Derbe, which are nothing more, really, although they're mentioned as cities, they're little more than inland towns along Galatia.

[13 : 31] Chapter 14, verse 6, he even says that from Lister and Derbe, he went into the surrounding country. It wasn't until the second missionary journey that there was a new plan in place, that the gospel now began to find a place in bonafide cities.

cities. It was almost what you would call the five-city tour. That's where you are right now in the book of Acts. You're in the midst of a five-city tour. The first of which was Philippi, where Luke's glossing comment is significant when he describes Philippi, he lets you know that you are now in, quote, a leading city of the district, and a Roman colony.

So when he moves to Philippi, and then on into Thessalonica, and then beyond into Berea, and then now at Athens, and then next at Corinth, well, without exception, other than Berea, these are all important port cities within the Roman world.

They're places of strength, faith, and it appears that Luke almost follows the example of other early historiographers when he writes his narrative.

He writes it not only along ethnographic lines in regard to how it moves, but he almost has this geographic building that what began in Jerusalem was scattered into the countryside, and from the countryside to the towns and the villages, even the cities, inlets, but now he wants you to know that the gospel finds a setting in cities.

[15 : 24] I mean, that ought to be helpful to you and to me. We should expect today that the gospel will find a foothold even here.

Now, we're about into our twelfth year here. Perhaps we're on the cusp of learning enough about here that the gospel would find a foothold here.

It's not only possible, as you read Luke's narrative, he wants you to know that it's probable that the gospel itself, this fragile, frail proclamation of Christ's death and resurrection, is not merely for the rural folk, the uneducated folk, the barbarian folk.

No, it's for the urban dweller. You should expect, I should expect, that the gospel will go even here.

Cities are a setting for the gospel. Now, think of that even in regard to the way the demographics of our own country are presently situated. You know, we're all into blue states and red states, and we think that conservative Christian belief is located really outside of cities, into rural settings.

[16 : 47] And the reader by this point in Luke's narrative should be wondering, could it be? Is the gospel strong enough to find a foothold in cities?

The second observation I want you to see over these couple of weeks is that it's not merely that the gospel can be set in a city, it can be set in a great city.

I mean, look at the text. Now, when Paul was waiting for them at Athens, you'd have to almost say this is the great city.

I mean, there's a lot of talk today about what is a great city. Well, we ought, in some sense, just to return to Athens and whatever the depiction of Athens is, that ought to be the defining characteristics of a great city because for millennia, this is the great city.

Our text brings us, then, in some sense, to the heart intention of Luke. When you arrive at chapter 17, verse 16, you are entering into the high water mark of his account.

[18 : 05] You are into the structural center. With Athens, you are at a climactic moment. Is and will the gospel find itself in the great city of the world?

Well, think about it. Athens had an illustrious past, replete with its intellectual prominence, its architectural preeminence.

It was the crown jewel of Greek civilization and culture. It was the native city of Socrates and Plato.

it was the place in which the republic was written, which defines our life together.

To this day, it was the adopted home of Aristotle, of Epicurus, of Zeno. Architecturally, I haven't been there and I can't wait to go.

[19 : 23] It's got the Parthenon, which I've only seen in two-dimensional picture form. It's got the Agora. It's got what maps proclaim to me to be the center of law and the mint and the temples where the magistrates would walk, the center of life.

We were in the book of Ruth this morning. They were describing the elders at the gate and the calling of ten elders together to the place of transaction business, jurisprudence.

The equivalent today, of course, of Athens would be a world-class city, but I don't know that there is a city in the world today truly comparable with Athens in its glory.

We speak today of our own country history, having its Judeo- Christian heritage, but one could make the equal argument that we are all rooted in the Athenian heritage, and that it is yet even preeminent today.

World-class cities are economic engines. They are educational powerhouses. They are ethnic melting pots, and when Luke brings you and me to Athens, he is telling the reader, do you think the gospel is truly unstoppable?

[21 : 25] Do you think the gospel can find roots here? They say in our own country, if you can make it in New York, if you can make it anywhere.

Well, in the 1940s, they would have said, if you could make it at 47th and Vincennes, you can make it anywhere. If you can make it in Athens, you can make it anywhere.

go to city, I think the city, but the great city.

I want you to see that there's also a great variety within its citizenry. Check this out, chapter 17, verse 17. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons.

In other words, the citizenry of Athens was comprised in part of monotheists, the Jews.

[22 : 38] They were among them, and they were evidently strong enough to have their own religious, cultic life within Athens. But those monotheists were also joined by what must have been God-fearing Gentiles.

So it was a multi-ethnic, monotheistic portion within the city. Men and women who got turned on to the Hebrew scriptures, who became people of text, primary texts.

And look in verse 17, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. The agora, the place where there were the law courts and the monuments and the altars and the magistrates where civic society made its way, where there were learned, able, educated, businessmen and women.

They were there too. Not necessarily monotheistic, not necessarily even religious. They were there. Not only that, it looks like it's got a little touch of Hyde Park as well.

Verse 18, some of the Epicurean and the Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. Indeed, the variety within the citizenry of Athens was great.

[24 : 17] By that I mean full, diverse, sophisticated academics who had coherent world views.

I was speaking earlier in the week with Ben Leinard and he was very helpful to me here when he began to describe for me something that I think is just a wonderful title, the Athenian aspiration.

Listen to what he told me. What sets Athens apart in the ancient world is the deeply felt need among its prevailing thinkers to locate something greater than material and even military glory for humans to achieve.

Something greater than material glory for us to achieve. What they came up with is a variety of intellectual aspirations, the basics of which are most formally articulated by Plato.

Well, it's the contemplation of the common good. Think of these world views then, the Epicureans.

[25 : 34] What was the chief end of man? Well, in some sense, it was to overcome the simple material world in which we lived, and certainly the base instincts that would more likely equate us with the animal world, sexual pleasures even, which our own city is so far beneath the Athenian aspiration, we are much more drawn to the base aspects of life where they wanted to elevate humanity into some great goal that had some purpose happiness.

And that the greatest pleasure that one would receive would be to, in a sense, live freely without care in the sense but making vital contribution in a sense, in shorthand, the life of the mind.

I don't know how else to put it. The Stoics were there. The Stoics, very rational, they too looked at life in terms of its material characteristics and they wanted to live according to rule and according to principle and they wanted to overcome the base instincts of humanity and so discipline was important, rigor.

They were very ethical, civically minded. In summary, what you have in Athens is a citizenry that is incredibly diverse. It's pluralistic and it's also relativistic and religious and academic and engaged.

Luke wants you to know that there are world views colliding here, but there's one great aspiration driving here. And Luke says to the reader, can you imagine the gospel finding a setting in the city, the city, among this citizenry?

[28 : 02] A city without any Christian categories to speak of. I think of Tertullian's often misapplied quip, what has Athens to do with Jerusalem?

According to Luke, evidently quite a lot. So where do we go then as we have looked at this setting? I want to spend the rest of the time giving four helps that I think are embedded in the text or takeaways that would be helpful to you and me as we think about our setting?

First, this ought to affect our outlook concerning the gospel. We ought to be optimistic about the church's chance of situating the gospel in a great city.

Notice the people there were more than simply indifferent toward it. They were intrigued by it. What is this that you say? I've heard this from students on the University of Chicago campus telling me regularly how open the context is for discussion on ideas of the Christian faith.

Isn't that wonderful? We ought to be optimistic. Luke is telling you that the gospel is strong enough to take root in the hearts of men and women in a place such as this.

[29 : 28] But we also ought to be not only optimistic about our chances for the gospel if you are to live here with me over the next 20 years. But we ought to be realistic about the cost of the gospel.

You ought to expect that it will not happen without difficulty. I mean look at 18b and some said what does this babblers wish to say?

The word there for babblers is a seed picker or a seed picker a bird I think of my alley I think of the garbage pickers you know got a little something here got a little something there I can make it work but you put it all together though they from those who were in Athens it didn't look like that Paul's teaching had a coherence to it when he began to speak about things it wasn't as if his faith was perhaps going to be strong enough in regard to being a complete world view to hold anyone that was so helpful to me because often I've begun discussions here in my neighborhood and with my friends and I felt almost as if I'm a babblers not to put you off when you begin to speak of

Jesus and the resurrection in Athens there will be people well I don't really know how all that fits together and I don't really know why that's so significant you keep talking about it as the most important event in all of history I don't quite understand that it seems like you've picked up some things here and there along the way yeah at first glance our message can be undiscernible!

It can appear weak incoherent verse 20 strange but we also ought to be realistic about the cost of the gospel not only that it will take time and we'll have to improve in our ability to demonstrate the coherence of the gospel message but look at verse 19 that phrase especially curiously set there they took hold of him and they brought him to the Areopagus Claire is presently working on this very chapter for a book or a monograph I'm not sure which and I was fortunate enough to see her own translation and I loved her translation of this word I think it's right detained it isn't just as if he they walked him along and said well come over here there's another group we'd like to hear about this no the Areopagus was the place where where there was kind of the unwritten code of what was going to be viable here or presentable here detained is a good word

[32 : 31] I felt that moving into Hyde Park 11 and a half years ago there is certainly there is a unknown Areopagus here there are keepers of the gate who listen regularly and early in our ministry to determine whether we Holy Trinity Church would be properly situated here could be properly situated here it's a very very dicey place to do gospel work isn't it and fortunately we've been very well received extraordinarily received God has been good the keepers of the gate have been kind they told us in a sense what they what Luke records in regard to Paul where he he went out from their midst he had freedom to go do whatever he was going to do and so do you but you ought to be realistic about the cause to the gospel certainly ought to begin to realize you should expect some difficulty

I mean it might actually be as if he had been arrested here if you don't take Luke's word on this in regard to your setting to expect difficulty! the Christian preacher who said all I can say is I look for perpetual conflicts and struggles but certainly if you don't like the authority of Luke or Whitefield you cannot resist Epictetus who said it is difficulties that show what men are truly you believe that so expect difficulty our outlook optimistic but realistic in other words as you begin to think about our future here together as a family and situating the gospel in this setting it will be a matter of the will that's what I like to say secondly it's a matter of the mind it will require preparation of our mind together as a congregation verse 16 now while

Paul was waiting for them at Athens his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols well you come into Chicago there aren't 33 thousand idols standing there waiting for you to say wow I think this is a very religious city you know you won't find that here but are you are we capable of recognizing the idols of our own city this is a discipline of the mind we'll need to be able to identify our idols not only be aware that they exist but be able to recognize them and so you ought to remember that an idol is anything that our citizenry finds ultimate satisfaction in other than God that's an idol it might be architecture ultimate satisfaction in the architecture of our city that could be an idol anything that your heart finds ultimate satisfaction in other than God is an idol it might be learning it might be the actual academic exercise for some of us ultimate satisfaction other than

God idol it might be pleasure it might be sex it might be power there might be there are all kinds of idols a veritable forest of them so it will be a matter of the will to situate ourselves in this setting but also a matter of the mind without this without recognizing the idols of our city there is no chance of supplanting those idols for a setting of the soul for the gospel of Jesus Christ third it's a matter of the heart then isn't it look at Paul verse 17 chapter 17 verse 16 while he was waiting for them at Athens his spirit was provoked it's provoked the subagent uses the word here provoked consistently to describe

God's intense agitation that leads him to anger when his people no longer follow his ways is your heart ever provoked in the city in which we live this is a great one for me to recognize because I love living in the city I love everything about the city or most things anyway it's a good reminder for those who love cities for those of us who trumpet and herald the glories of the city is our heart ever provoked by what we see in the city does our heart ever pound with the conscience of a holy God that's a challenge then we need to wean our heart from the ways of the world and wed our heart to the glories of God that's what Luke is telling you in great cities God's people have to have this internal provocation of God not only concerning the sins of our city but I think the sins of our own heart the heart of your pastor what are the idols and is he intent on tearing them down will he really have no one other than

[38 : 54] God's glory what of yourself what do you take ultimate satisfaction in even beyond God himself there will be no ability to set the gospel in this place without it being not merely a matter of the will or the mind but the heart finally and I close with this it's a matter of the lips look at Paul verse 17 so he reasoned in the synagogue and with all who happen to be in the marketplace there's an intentional commitment to verbal discourse that's what it is you know we talk in Chicago about voting early and often here he is speaking early and often and he is out in the open knowing that his imperfect articulation is going to appear incoherent in his setting but he believes that the power of the risen son and the strength of the spirit is strong enough to win the heart and to present a new person set for

God's kingdom it's a matter of the lips speaking actually presenting the gospel what is that quote I don't know if it's St.

Francis of Assisi or it's attributed to him that whole notion of you know preach the gospel every day and if necessary use words I think Paul Luke they all would have turned that thing on his head and say that is absolutely the stupidest thing I've ever heard in my life and it is stupid nobody's going to come to know Jesus by your actions give me a break all they're going to think is that you're a pretty good person pretty nice person pretty amazing person no it's a matter of intentional discourse of knowledge of sharing that which you have come to believe and so we're halfway in to this glory of the gospel next week we'll consider not merely the setting but the speech itself and how does our speech need to be altered or changed or informed by this great

Athenian telling by Luke let's pray our heavenly father we thank you for your word given to us!

and we live in a wonderful setting and we desire that your gospel would take root here begin with ourselves make our will be committed our mind prepared our heart plowed and our lips ready to proclaim for your glory the welfare of this city amen■