

Worldview Evangelism

Athens in Paul's day was a city at the very center of world society – a cosmopolitan place, the crossroads of many cultures, abuzz with the latest philosophies and ideas. Athens was also full of idols. It has been said by a Roman poet that “it was easier in Athens to find gods than men.”

Acts 17:16-34

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. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ 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. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ 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, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. 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.”

²⁹ 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. ³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ 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.”

³² Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” ³³ So Paul went out from their midst. ³⁴ But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Paul was not impressed when he saw the many glories of Athens. In fact, he was grieved that God was not receiving the glory that He deserved. Paul knew that there were many in the city unaware of their spiritual needs, and unprepared for the judgement to come. Paul wanted to share his worldview with others. What can we learn from Paul's example of worldview evangelism?

Here are five observations of Paul's strategies:

I. Paul engaged other people's worldview (v.17)

We are often intimidated by culture, but Paul feared God more than he feared human beings. "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." Paul's cultural engagement paid off. He was invited to the Areopagus to give an account of the gospel. Keep engaging other people. You never know how God may use you.

II. Paul built a bridge (vv.22-23)

The Athenians built an altar to an unknown god — by this they were willing to admit they don't know everything. Paul studied the culture enough to make use of this as a connection to the gospel. There is always a footing for the gospel, it is the greatest need of our existence.

III. Paul introduced people to the Christian worldview (vv.24-29)

Paul doesn't just point out the similarities between religious ideas to win the Athenians. Instead, he insists on the truth of the Christian worldview. Paul introduces the sovereign, omnipresent, all-powerful God Who created and sustains all things. But he also tells the Athenians that God was very near to each one of us and wanted them to find Him. In a concise, straightforward way, Paul tells who God is.

IV. Paul shares the gospel (vv.30-32)

Paul presents the good news by starting with the bad news. God calls for repentance, and judgement is coming. It is the bad news that makes the good news so good! Paul presents the crucifixion and resurrection as historical fact.

V. Paul left the results up to God (v.33-34)

People listened and believed. (Dionysus eventually became the bishop of Athens.) God will be glorified when you share the gospel. We need to trust that God will use us even with our limited gifts. He will bring people to Himself.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you respond when you see the magnificent glories of the material world? Why is it so hard to see past the material prosperity to spiritual poverty in our culture?
2. Where are you entering into the environment around you with critical engagement? Why do you think it so easy for us to keep to ourselves rather than engage?
3. What are some ways that you can prepare to "make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect?" (1 Peter 3:15)

Going Deeper:

What bridges of relationship are you building with people you know that don't know Christ?
When is the last time you had the opportunity to present the gospel to a friend?