

Spreading the Gospel With Confidence: Paul Among the Pagans

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Even though the Apostle Paul communicated the Christian message about nineteen and a half centuries ago, the world he spoke to dealt with many of the same issues we face today. In the following article we will examine the similarities between our world today and the world to which Paul ministered, then we will look at the source of his confidence. From Paul's example, we can learn how to better reach our world today.

The intellectual climate in Athens at the time Paul was speaking was one of disenchantment with the old religions of the Greeks and Romans. People were weary of the many gods they had worshiped for centuries. These gods were like larger-than-life human beings, often even more cruel and immoral than the men and women who worshiped them.

Athens was the center of what was known as the greatest wisdom of the ancient world, but many people were questioning whether Greek wisdom had fulfilled its promise. There was a growing skepticism that human wisdom would ever be sufficient to find real answers to the problems of human existence, and there was a longing that there might be one God that people could worship and know. With so much weariness of what had been handed down from the past, many people were turning to new religions called mystery religions in the hopes that these might fulfill their spiritual longings.

Despite all of this, the overwhelming theme for the majority of ordinary people was simple idolatry. People were worshipping things that were less than God and giving their lives up to them.

Today we also live in a culture filled with uncertainty and confusion. The breakdown of Marxism, one of the great "hopes" of this century, has left many searching and hungry for a new world order. Many people have proclaimed the dawn of a new age of political and economic freedom and prosperity. But already, in only half a dozen years, great doubts surround us.

We live in a culture where, for the last two centuries, there has been a great confidence in human reason similar to the Greeks' confidence in wisdom. But that faith in human reason has been found wanting, and this has resulted in a deep cynicism in our society.

There has been a dramatic decline over the last thirty or forty years of the kind of secularized, watered-down version of Christianity that many churches offer. Many people have seen that such so-called Christianity does not meet their needs or answer their questions, so they have turned away.

But the overwhelming theme in our society, just as it was in Paul's day, is practical idolatry. Our society is governed by the pursuit of material pleasures. People devote themselves to things which are not capable of satisfying the needs of the human heart in the end.

Now in such a time as this, how are we going to communicate the Gospel? In Acts 17 the Apostle Paul was in Athens, the cultural center of Greek wisdom and learning. He used his time there to learn about the city by going around and observing their idols: “While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16). Paul acted on that observation: “So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there” (17:17). A group of Stoic and Epicurian philosophers, intrigued by Paul’s preaching, brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus.

There for a Purpose

We see from Paul’s actions in Athens that he had a deep confidence in preaching the Gospel message because he had a deep confidence in God. Paul was confident that God’s hand was over his life. Wherever he went, whatever city he was in, whatever his personal situation was, Paul believed God had placed him there for a purpose. In Philippians 1:12 Paul tells us, “I want you to know that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.”

Therefore when Paul goes to Athens, he acts with the assurance that he is there to spread the Gospel. Since God has placed him in Athens, he goes out into the marketplace day by day to speak to those who happen to be there.

Doors Will Open

Paul also had the conviction that wherever he went God would open doors for him. That was always his prayer for himself as in Colossians 4:3, “pray for us that God may open a door for our message.”

Paul’s prayer and confidence was that wherever he was, God would open a door for the Gospel to be proclaimed. And of course that is exactly what happened in Athens. God opened an extraordinary door for Paul when he was invited to the Areopagus—a place something like the supreme court and a university all in one. It was as if all of the finest professors from all of the universities came together and said to him, “Paul, we want to hear what you have to say.” I am sure that in his wildest dreams Paul never thought he would be standing on Mars Hill speaking to this collection of people.

That must be our prayer and confidence as well. Wherever we are, God has put us there for the defense of the Gospel, and He will open doors for us too.

Courage Will Come

Paul also has the confidence that God will give him courage. In 1 Corinthians 2:1-4, Paul tells us that people said he was not a very impressive person, but Paul’s confidence was not in his own strength. We have to say with Paul that we are not sufficient. We are broken vessels. But God Himself is our sufficiency.

Light Will Shine

Paul’s greatest confidence was that God would shine the light of the Gospel into people’s hearts. His prayer and confidence was that the same God who had said at the beginning of creation, “let light shine out of darkness,” would make the light of the Gospel shine into people’s hearts.

This is fundamental as we seek to communicate the Gospel to our generation. Paul’s confidence was in the work of God as he sought to make this message known. In answer to the question, “Who is sufficient to make God’s truth known to one’s generation?” we must answer as Paul that we are not sufficient, but God

himself is able to be our sufficiency. He will give us strength and courage. He will open doors for the Gospel, and He will penetrate people's hearts with the light of the Gospel.

Made in God's Image

The Image Remains

The Apostle Paul had a deep confidence that God had never abandoned the human race. Despite the terrible reality of human sin, which mars and obscures the likeness of God in us, Paul had the confidence that men and women had not been abandoned by God. He believed God was still at work in this world upholding His image in every person.

In Romans 2 Paul tells us that every man and woman he would ever meet had the law of God inscribed on their hearts. Wherever he went, Paul knew that there were men and women who performed acts of kindness and gave to others. In Acts 27, when Paul and his companions are shipwrecked on the island of Malta, the pagan islanders showed "unusual kindness" to Paul and the men from the ship. This reality of God's image in those to whom he went was always on Paul's mind.

Christ's Example

Paul also knew that Christ had treated people with respect. The woman at the well had been married five times and was living with somebody she wasn't married to. Yet Christ treated her with great dignity and honor. Christ went to a sinner like Zaccheus the tax collector and asked to go to his house for dinner. Christ had a prostitute come and anoint his feet with precious ointment. Just as Christ treated men and women with respect, so did the Apostle Paul.

Paul's Witness

When Paul went to Athens, he was greatly distressed by their idolatry, their sin of unbelief, and the temples that were all over the city. Paul was not happy about their idols, but he finds something about them that he can respect. "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious, for as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship..." (Acts 17:22-23).

In Ephesus, Paul finds himself in the midst of a riot, but again we see that he has spoken only with respect, so that there is no charge to be placed against him. The town clerk quiets the riot by telling the crowd that in all his teaching, Paul had not blasphemed their goddess, Diana (Acts 19:37). Paul did not go about abusing people or their beliefs. He spoke with respect about people and to people.

This kind of respect is repeatedly commanded by the New Testament. The Apostle Peter says that believers ought to always be ready to make a defense of the hope we have, but to do so with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15), and in Colossians 4:6 Paul says, "Let your conversation be always full of grace."

We are commanded to be gracious because the people to whom we speak bear the image of God. We are also to be gracious because we bear a message of God's grace to us. We have experienced the grace, kindness and mercy of God in our hearts. How can we not show that same grace, kindness and mercy to other people?

The Church Today

The modern church fails desperately in this area. We have gotten caught up in the abusive language of the culture war. How often do we make jokes about the people around us who are not Believers? How often do we ridicule, curse and abuse our political leaders? Is this the way God wants us to speak to and about our contemporaries?

God calls us to speak with the graciousness and compassion of Jesus Christ. These people are harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd (Mt. 9:36). They are in desperate need of the truth. In Luke 6:27-28, Jesus says, "I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you." In James 3:9-10, the Apostle James says, "With our tongues we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers this should not be."

Even when he was among the idolaters of Athens the Apostle Paul acted with the conviction that those men and women were made in the image of God, despite their sin, rebellion, and idolatry. Paul did not want to dishonor God by denying that image in them. If you ever desire to communicate the Gospel to anyone you must come to them with grace, gentleness and respect. That is what the Bible commands.

God Has Left a Testimony

God's Testimony in Creation

Paul had a deep confidence that God has left a testimony to Himself and His truth in this world. He used these very words in speaking to the pagans in Lystra when they tried to offer sacrifices to him and Barnabas, "Yet [God] has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy" (Acts 14:17).

Paul had the confidence that wherever he went in this world every man and woman he would ever meet had been exposed to the declaration of the glory of God in creation, in providence, and in the human heart. Paul knew that God's eternal power and divine nature were clearly to be perceived in the things God had made everywhere. Paul expressed this in Romans 1, and we see this truth proclaimed in Psalm 19:1, "The heavens declare the glory of God. The skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Paul had the confidence that this was the reality wherever he went. Therefore when Paul went to Athens or when he went anywhere else, he could build bridges to his hearers. He knew that there were aspects of their thinking and their worship on which he could build. It was not that they really knew the truth about God, but Paul knew that they would know enough to create a starting point for communication.

That is exactly what we find in Paul's first words to the men of Athens, "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. . ." (Acts 17:22). Those people had a longing to know God. There was a seeking after one God in the Greek world, and Paul recognized that and builds upon it.

God's Testimony in Mankind

We also see in this passage that Paul recognized that these Athenians have a sense that God is far greater than we are – far greater than humanity. Man senses something unique about human dignity, that we are in some sense in the likeness of God. Paul is able to quote their poets who said we are God's offspring, and we have our life in Him (Acts 17:28).

These are aspects of their thinking that Paul is able to build upon because God has not left Himself without a testimony anywhere in the world. There will be some evidence of God, some testimony to His glory and greatness, in every human heart. A person may try to suppress this knowledge. They may try to ignore it, but it is there. And it is something to which we can appeal.

Paul had the confidence that he would never meet a single person who had nothing upon which to build. There is no person who escapes living in this world God has made. This is the only world there is, and we all have to live in it. There is no human being who does not bear the image of God, because God made us that

way, and that testimony rises up in our heart. As we go to people, our task is to look for that point where we can start to build. We can have confidence that there is something we can commend in their thinking.

I grew up in a non-Christian home, and my father was converted at the age of 75, just six weeks before he died. For almost 60 years my father had been a Marxist. When I converted and began to talk to him about Christianity, the place where I began was not Marxism, but his own moral convictions. My father, despite his Marxism, was a deeply moral man. He was a wonderful husband, and a father whom I admire and seek to emulate to this very day. Even though he was very poor, my father was a man of great kindness to our neighbors. My father was a man of moral conviction who was outraged by the moral breakdown in British society, and this was the point where we were able to start communicating.

God had placed in my father's heart the testimony of the glory and truth of who God is, how He made this universe, how He made us, and how He has called us to live. My father's morals could not save him, but they were a place where we could start to communicate. Wherever we go, whoever we meet, we should not simply ask, "What's wrong with these people? What's wrong with their thinking? How can I tear it down?" Instead, we can start by asking, "What is right with their thinking? What can I commend? Where can I begin to build?" That is exactly what the Apostle Paul did.

This is the confidence with which Paul communicated the Gospel. First his confidence was in the work that God would do. Despite his weakness, Paul had the confidence that God would be at work, opening doors, providing opportunities, giving him courage, helping him to speak clearly, opening people's hearts and convicting them of the truth. He had confidence in God. He also had confidence that God has not abandoned the human race but still maintains His image in every human person. And lastly, he had confidence that God so desires to save people that he has not left Himself without testimony, but there is a testimony speaking loudly and clearly in the heart and mind of every human person who was around Paul and who is around each of us.

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