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A Faith Worth  
Believing, Living, and Commending

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A FAITH WORTH BELIEVING, LIVING, AND COMMENDING

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on its tenth anniversary,  
with gratitude for your partnership in the gospel.

## Paul's Apologetic Preaching at Mars Hill (Acts 17:16–34)\*

**S**T. PAUL WAS ON the move again—often the victim of persecution, revilement, and cruelty—despite his good experience with the nobles of Berea. He was forced to leave because those that treated him harshly, while he ministered in Thessalonica, had perused him. He fled to Athens, leaving behind Silas and Timothy to tend to the young church. The evangelistic team was broken up. Paul was forlorn in the alien culture of a colossal city engrossed with idolatry.

As he was walking around the streets of Athens, he was profoundly anxious. Torn apart within because every corner he turned he saw idols. He was greatly concerned that God should be honored, firmly convinced that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. But as he looked around the city, he saw no understanding of God as God, no evidence of the glory going to God, and no conviction that Jesus is the Savior. His heart was deeply stirred because wherever he went he saw more gods than anything else.

### *Heart Roused into Action*

Henry Martin, the missionary to India, had a dream in which he saw Jesus prostrating at the foot of a Hindu deity. He said, “That excited in me more horror than I could ever express. I was cut to the soul at that blasphemy. I could not endure existence if Jesus were not glorified. It would be hell for me if Jesus would be so dishonored.”

Now we could be emotionally disturbed and not be moved to do anything. When Paul was emotionally distressed, what did he do? Acts

\* With some variations, this sermon was frequently delivered in former Soviet Union, former Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia, and over a decade of evangelistic ministry (1991–2000).

17:17 says, "Therefore he reasoned with the Jews and the devout Greeks in the synagogue and daily in the marketplace." Idols aroused in Paul an inner compulsion to debate, witness, and preach. His usual practice was to go to the Jewish synagogue on Saturday; where he tried to convince the Jews that Jesus Christ was the Messiah, as promised in the Old Testament. Then between Sunday and the following Saturday, he did not stand idle. Instead he would go to the marketplace, in the open air, and reason daily with any people who might be there.

Word spread and many people gathered around Paul to hear him. Verse 21 says, "The Athenians and foreigners stayed around doing nothing, but telling and hearing something new." Paul's preaching drew the highly educated and articulate Athenian philosophers down to the marketplace to hear him.

### *Epicurean and Stoic Philosophies*

Epicurean and Stoic philosophy were prevalent in Greece, at the time. The Epicureans were the materialists, according to whom pleasure was the chief goal of life. But the only pleasure worth possessing was a life of tranquility, free from pain and anxiety. The Epicureans pursued a simple life with reasoned and moderated indulgence. Their sole preoccupation is with this earthly life, for there is no after-life from which to fear or hope. God, if he exists, dwells in eternal calm, utterly transcendent and completely uninvolved in the lives of people.

On the contrary, the Stoics were the pantheists, according to whom reality is one, without distinction, that God is all, and all is God. Adherents to the new-age movement are pantheists. Shirley Maclean claimed to have discovered the truth about herself, and concluded, "I am God." For the Stoics, the only good is to follow one's reason and be self-sufficient, unmoved by inner feeling or outward circumstances. All other things—life, death, pleasure, and pain—were indifferent, neither good nor evil. The Stoics espoused ethics characterized by self-control, obedience, and duty. Although they affirmed with Paul the immanence of God, they repudiated his assertion that history has an end, moving from the time of ignorance to that of repentance, and finally to the day of judgment.

These two groups of philosophers were present in the marketplace. As Paul began to speak, they gave him a hard time. Some asked, "What on earth is this babblers trying to say?" Others said, "He seems to be preaching

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rather strange gods, because Paul was preaching about Jesus and the resurrection" (v. 18). So they gave Paul a very special invitation: "Come to the Areopagus" (v.19); "we want to hear the new teachings you are preaching for they are strange ideas to our ears" (v.20).

The Areopagus is a hill that overlooks the marketplace. The Latin translation is Mars Hill, and it was the place where people went to philosophize and was once the meeting place of the Athenian court. Paul was invited to appear there, no doubt for public session but not necessarily in the form of a legal trial. The occasion gave him the opportunity to explain the true God.

### *Building Bridges*

Despite all the perversity Paul saw in their idols he began his address with a positive and complimentary note about Athenian spirituality. Verse 22 reads, "You men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious." This may seem ironic but Paul sought to build bridges and did not try to take God's role as judge. He did not say, "You men of Athens, I perceive that in every way, you are wrong, and you are going to hell" or "in every way, I know the truth, and you don't, and if you keep quiet, I will tell you the truth." Instead, he commended them for their religiosity. To earn the right to be heard, a double portion of tact is required. There should not be any offense in us. The offense is in the gospel. Christ himself is the stumbling block, not us.

Unbelievers cannot absorb the content of the Bible if its message is obscured by objectionable attitudes and behavior. An Indian proverb illustrates this, "When you cut off a person's nose, there is no use to give him a rose to smell." A skilled English hunter was having trouble killing birds and said to his attendant, "Today is just not my day . . . I did not shoot well, did I?" Smilingly, the attendant replied, "I beg to disagree. It isn't that you are shooting poorly, but that God is merciful towards the birds." The attendant's reply showed the kind of tact Paul used even as he was agitated by Athens's excessive idolatry. His positive introduction provided an appropriate entry point for his address.

Paul's discovery of the most honest altar with the inscription "To the unknown god" (v. 23) shattered him. It is terribly sad for someone to build an altar and not even know the object of their worship. Though part of Paul may have been grieved he capitalized on the Athenian's apparent

deep desire, commitment and this particular ray of honesty he saw in their worship. The craftsman had no idea which way to begin, except to set up an altar with the inscription: "To the unknown god." Paul perceived the positives and negatives and eagerly seized the inscription as a way to introduce the reality behind this "unknown god" of the Athenians. He provided an answer that met with their deepest desire of God, about whom they did not know anything. How utterly lost in their philosophies these people were! To a person who worships God ignorantly, Paul said in verse 23, "Whom therefore you ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you." He declared to them the true God so that their religion would not be devoid of meaning and content, and their devotion may have direction and basis.

Paul is a great master at making use of these pagan ideas as a bridge or a starting point of contact for gospel proclamation. He understood the ways and cultural milieu of the Athenian people. He was well-versed in Greek philosophy, and perceived glimmers of truth in their pagan philosophy. Later in the text, he quoted their ideas, turning them into another point of contact for gospel preaching. Furthermore, he quoted pagan ideas to expose their errors, and destroy their own system of idolatry (vv. 28–29).

#### *Athenian Ignorance Exposed*

For Paul, God cannot be rightly worshipped except as he is known. The Athenian problem, which Paul identified, was their ignorant worship. With audacity and skill, he set them right about their conceptions of God with a view which would lead them toward efficacious worship. There are three things concerning God of which they were totally ignorant.

The first thing they were ignorant of is the fact that God cannot be domesticated and confined to a certain locality. The Athenians believed in a god with a regional domain. Their city contained beautiful architecture that made it easy to discern where deity dwelled. The second misconception is that we must appease God with gifts. This notion implies that power for salvation is in our hands. Finally, the Athenians believed that God needs us.

God neither dwells in buildings made by men, nor is he to be worshipped with things men offer him; nor does he need anything from men. God is not helpless; we are, and we need him. Their view of god is with handicaps, like a disabled mother who is put in a beautiful nursing home—because she cannot visit people, people have to come and visit her



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during visiting hours. Paul's dialogue shows them their erroneous beliefs and an all powerful, self sufficient, omnipresent being that we are lost without. He said,

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 and 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. Yet he is actually not 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.'" (Acts 17:22-28, ESV)

The only way we can worship correctly is by taking freely that which he offers us. If we think we can give God anything of value without first receiving from him all that we need, we are like the Athenians, who worshipped God ignorantly. We can give him only what he has first given. This is borne out in Psalm 116:12-13: "What shall I give to the Lord for all that he has given unto me? I'll take the cup of salvation." True worship consists in offering God the sacrifice of thanksgiving that is rightly due him.

### *True Knowledge of God Expounded*

After outlining the errors of the Athenian system, Paul positively pointed out things they really needed to know about God in order that they might worship God correctly. This, said Calvin, explained why Paul in his Areopagus sermon in verse 24 "makes a beginning with a definition of God, so that he might prove from that how God ought to be worshipped, because the one thing depends upon the other."<sup>1</sup> The knowledge of God, which is the presupposition of true worship, is spelled out in verses 24-29.

1. See Calvin's Commentary on Acts 17:25 as cited in John Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 152. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003.

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First, God is the creator (v. 24). God created the universe and all that is in it. He did it alone, without the use of any pre-existent materials. He did it *ex nihilo*, i.e., without the use of any antecedent causes, without human advice or assistance. He did not have any engine but his own word; he did not have any pattern but his own mind. The world and all that is in it are the effects of divine causality. God commanded this universe into being by his own speech, which is his own action.

Secondly, God is the Lord of heaven and earth (v. 24). He is just as active in ruling and sustaining this universe as in creating it. The same power that created the vast universe holds all things together in the palm of his hand. This God does not grow weary, nor does he have the capacity to dissipate. This is set in stark contrast with the Athenian conception of God, in which God is worshipped in temples made by men. Today you can still go to the magnificent Parthenon, one of the masterpieces of human ingenuity. The Parthenon was meant to be God's dwelling place, a place of free worship where people could come and worship whatever they wanted. In truth though it was a temple built to glorify human achievement rather than God.

Magnificent as the Parthenon is, God does not live there. Neither does he fit into any human pattern; nor can he be represented by creaturely or created things. As the uncreated God, he made and sustains heaven and earth and all things therein. He is utterly immense, and completely infinite. There is no place in his creation in which he is not, or from which he is excluded. He fills the universe with his presence, yet remains distinct from it. This runs contrary to the Stoic Pantheistic conception of God, in which Creator and creation merge into one, as a drop of water dissolves into the vast ocean.

One of the implications of asserting that God is the Creator and Lord is that a distinction must be drawn between God and his creations. To illustrate, the painter and painting are distinct, not to be confused. To worship aright is to worship the God of creation, unlike the Athenians who worship his creations, and thus worship wrongly. There is a natural tendency, because of sin, to serve "the created things rather than the Creator" (cf. Rom 1:25), thereby merging the creator and the creation.

Next, God is the giver and we are the recipients of all his gifts. We are in the presence of the God who gives us "life, breath and everything else" (v. 25). God is the source of our being and the sustainer of our well-being. Everything we have comes from him; we do not give to him as if he needs

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anything from us. We do not help him out. There is no lack or deficiency or contingency in God's being. He does not depend on us for something he does not possess, for he is infinitely resourceful. We do not enrich or enhance God's being by what we give him. He is the divine sovereign, the creator and ruler of this universe, the giver, who is self-sufficient, independent of us, and needs nothing from us. With these assertions, Paul discredits the rampant idolatry of the Athenians. God as God does not need us to do any spiritual routines, as if his being requires them. We are absolutely contingent upon God, the giver of life, breath and everything. It is to God alone that we owe our very being and well-being: "For from him, and through him, and to him are all things. To him be the Glory!" (Rom 11:36)

Fourth, God is the governor and controller of nations and history. Verse 26 reads: "From one man or one source God makes every nation of men to settle on the face of the earth." That alone would have been a shock to the Athenians, according to whom the world consists of only two kinds: the Greeks and the barbarians. They were the super-race, the international hotshots. But Paul declared that we are of the same family tree, whatever race or color we are. God even "determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live" (v. 26b). He is controlling history and the destiny of men and nations. He planned the exact times when nations should rise and fall. He also planned the specific area to be occupied by each nation.

John Wesley has a good biblical outlook. He said, "I read the newspapers to see how God is governing his world." History is on schedule, because God is running it. This perspective is a refutation of the Epicureans who thought that everything happens by chance; it is also a repudiation of the Stoics who thought things happen by fate; and it is also a rejection of modern secular science which does not acknowledge a higher power or authority over them and all their investigations.

Fifth, God, though transcendent, is immanently near to each one of us. There is a purpose clause in verse 27: "God did this *so that* men would seek him, and feel after him and find him." Everything God has done—the creating and sustaining of the universe, the giving of life, breath and everything, and all that he is doing in history and for nations—is geared towards one end, that men may seek him in the hope of finding him. This is the climax of Paul's sermon. God's objective in creation, in preservation, in providence, and in history is to reveal himself so that men may see that revelation and follow after him and find him.

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The nearness of God is the main point Paul intended to communicate. In other words, the Athenians do not have to be trapped in their ignorant worship, for God can be intelligently known, and thus rightly worshipped. Our indwelling father, God, has supplied the very contents of who he is so that they could worship him by the knowledge he has given them. This is the liberating news which Paul wanted the Athenians to embrace as a way out of their impotent worship.

In parts of the world where the gospel is not heard, do people still possess the revelation of God? Of course, as his offspring God is not far from each one of us, and can be found. He reveals himself to all creatures. No one who desires it is deprived of the knowledge of God. Jeremiah 29:13 affirms, "You shall seek me and find me when you search me with all your hearts." Psalm 145:18-19 also puts it affirmatively: "The Lord is near to those who call upon him, and to all who call upon him in truth. He'll fulfill the desires of those who fear him; he will hear their cries and save them."

What will happen to the pagans? If they really seek to know God, God will hear their cries and save them. God does not hold people responsible for what they do not know. God has put himself on display in the world so that men may search after him and find him. To illustrate this, Paul pulled out two quotations from pagan Greek poetry in verse 28: "For in him we live and move and have our being." As some of your poets have said, "we are God's offspring." The first quotation ("For in him we live and move and have our being") came from Epimenides, and the second ("we are his offspring") from Aratus. The first quotation is an application to a pagan divinity named Zeus. Why did Paul quote this statement from Greek poetry that was originally applied to a pagan god? What Paul intended to say to the Greeks is this: look, your own poets, in their ignorance of the true God, afforded us infallible proof that God is knowable as the creator, sustainer, and the God of providence. Did not Epimenides say, by whatever name God is, that "it is in him we live, move and have our being?" Your own poet illustrates that God has revealed himself so that, even though they attach it to the wrong God, it is obvious to them that there is a God who makes them, holds all things together, and who takes care of them, even though they are ignorant of the God they desire to know.

And we came from him, as your own poet, Aratus, said, "We are God's offspring." Paul was emphatic that natural revelation is so obvious that the poets can see it, though they attach it to the wrong conception of

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God. The revelation of God is so inherent in all of us, and so obvious to the pagans, even though it leads them to the wrong god.

Being well-versed in Greek philosophy, he quoted their ideas, utilizing them for the service of the gospel. He made use of the pagan ideas not only to expose their errors, but also to redirect their ignorant worship. This is evident in verse 29: "Therefore, since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man." For God is not capable of any material representation; nor can he be reduced to the level of a creature. Paul thus called them to do away with their ignorant worship, and turn from their egocentricity or idolatry to the worship of the living God. Verse 30 reads: "In the past, God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent."

Finally, God is the judge. He has appointed a day and a person who will judge the world in righteousness. That person is Jesus Christ, the distinct Son of God, the Righteous One, "For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (v. 31). God has given them the assurance of his judgment. He even told them by whom he will judge, by the totally righteous one, Jesus Christ. You can be sure of this because God has raised him from the dead. Jesus Christ, the unique, distinct Son of God, the total righteousness, is the one who will judge. Therefore, we better repent. Paul said that the way they had gone about was a way of ignorance, which God had overlooked. Now repent, turn to the risen Christ, by whom the world will be judged.

Repentance is the missing note of so much preaching today. Paul preached it in Thessalonica, and here at Mars Hill. Why? Because God commands it. He did not allow his tact and understanding of pagan culture to interfere with the clear presentation of the gospel. He preached Jesus and his resurrection, the theme on which everything hinges. He was willing to love the Athenians. But when it came to the real issue, he did not compromise. He preached what God had commanded, even repentance, a theme which did not appeal to self-sufficient arrogant souls like the Stoics. They were prepared to hear philosophical arguments about God, to discuss or dispute with Paul. But something terminated the meeting, and it was the subject of Jesus and resurrection of the dead (v. 32).

*Thoughts on Apologetic Preaching*

There are three responses to Paul's sermon on the subject of the resurrection: (a) some sneered at it; (b) others said we will hear it again; and (c) a few believed, among them were Dionysius, a learned member of the Athenian court, who tradition said became the first Bishop of Athens, and also a woman named Damaris and a number of others. In light of these responses, I will conclude with a few practical pointers, which constitute a final word about apologetic preaching:

First, some argue that this is Paul's biggest failure, and his apologetics were a complete waste of time and effort. These people contend that his method was faulty and he blew it. I beg to differ, for Paul had no reason to believe that his labor was in vain. An intelligent apologist would know that, when dealing with the intellectuals, genuine results will always be few and far between. In my personal dialogue with intellectual Muslims and other religious adherents, the conversion rate has always been low.

Subsequently we must keep in mind that our responsibility as evangelists is not to persuade those who do not want to believe, but to make sure that everybody is given a chance to either *believe* or *disbelieve intelligently*. Those who believe will believe intelligently, and the rest who do not believe now have an opportunity to disbelieve intelligently, which they never had before. Thus we are to hold out the gospel so that the hearers are without excuse, and could not take refuge in the pretext of ignorance.

Next, as a working definition, apologetics is commending the truth of the gospel in such an attractive, scintillating, and relevant way that people are made to feel and think that Christianity may be true, not that it is true. Conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit while we just try to deliver the message. A practical question that often plagues the apologist is this, "how can I know that I have done the task of apologetic preaching?" If I can present the gospel to the post-Christian culture in such a way that makes my audience sit up and say, like the Athenians did, "I will hear you again, perhaps there are truths in Christianity I may have missed or misunderstood. I hope to search more," then I have done my job as an apologist. If we can create in others a thirst for the gospel, then rest assured that we have done a fairly good job as an apologist. Leave the result ultimately to the Holy Spirit, the power of the efficacy in the hearts of the hearers.

Finally, inasmuch as I admire the faithful apologists, and as often as I do apologetics, always bear in mind that we are not defending God,

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who needs no defense, but defending a belief system or our faith, as Paul did in Mars Hill. Apologetics, when it is defending God, is arrogant and idolatrous. Jesus is the great lion of Judah. You do not defend a lion; you just let it loose.