

Non-believers, who consider themselves to be intellectuals, can be very hard to reach. Intellectuals, who accept Christ as Lord and Savior, can be great defenders of the faith, but some of the most outspoken critics of Christian faith are scientists, authors, or specialists, who are highly respected in the academic community. Most have extensive educations and are considered to be experts in their field.

Head knowledge is a good thing, but there is no true wisdom apart from faith in Jesus Christ. Through academic study, many are taught that there is no need for a creator God to explain the fundamental questions of life. Why are we here? What is man's purpose? What happens after we die? Why do things happen the way they do? They look at nature with a preconceived idea that there is a natural explanation for every question.

Reaching a highly educated can be a challenge. The most fundamental truths of God's word are foreign to many of them. Many of the conclusions they reach, are the exact opposite of the truth. They come from a secular world-view, while Christians come from a biblical world-view.

In tonight's passage we see how Paul faces the challenge of reaching a group who considered themselves to be the smartest and wisest of all people. The gospel never changes, but we have to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit in order to know how to effectively share the love of Christ with different people groups. Let's see what lessons we might learn from reading together Acts 17:16-34.

Paul's second missionary journey got off to a slow start, but once he had a vision to go to Macedonia, the missionary team shared the gospel effectively, and helped to start churches, on the European continent. Their first success was in Philippi, followed by their ministry in Thessalonica, and last time we read of their efforts in Berea.

In that passage we read about how the men of Berea stole Paul out of town, under the cloak of darkness, because Jews from Thessalonica threatened Paul's safety. While he sent word to Silas and Timothy to join him in Athens, he became involved in ministry in that city before they arrived.

Notice that the bible says that the Spirit provoked Paul when he saw that the city was full of idols. Paul was a highly educated man, but his call to action came from the movement of the Holy Spirit in his heart and mind. We should prepare ourselves to be able to share the gospel as effectively as possible, but we must never forget the importance of the role of the Holy Spirit. No matter how smart, clever, or persuasive, a person may be, none of us can reach a lost person apart from the movement of the Holy Spirit.

It troubled Paul to see all of these idols of false gods in Athens. An idol of course is a man-made object, which is worshiped or held in esteem above the true Creator God. It may take the form of a physical image, or it may be something formed in the mind that people exalt above God, or to the exclusion of God.

As was his practice, Paul first went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles. In previous passages, Luke tells us of Paul's successes, but we get no indication here that he made much headway in the synagogue. We have already seen examples of his sermons to the Jews in the synagogues, but in this passage we have an example of how Paul preached in the marketplace, to a group of intellectual, who were thoroughly pagan.

While the Hellenist movement was past its prime, Athens was the then center of Greek culture and thought. The Athenian people considered themselves to be thinkers, and prided

themselves on their wisdom. Greek philosophy naturally divided between two schools of thought: the Epicureans, and the Stoics. Epicurean philosophy is based upon the idea that the chief purpose of man is to experience pleasure and happiness. If there is a god, they would say that, he is not concerned with the affairs of man. The stoics were pantheistic. They believed that the purpose of man was to direct history through tragedy, and triumph, in accordance with the actions of the gods.

People who subscribed to these two schools of thought spent their days debating their philosophies with one another. They considered themselves to be very intellectual, and open-minded. They liked to argue their points, so when Paul presented a viewpoint that was foreign to them, some wanted to hear him out, while others wanted him to stop spreading his teachings.

They had their Greek gods, but Paul preached a God foreign to them. These were strange teachings that they could not understand, because their teachers taught things contrary to the gospel. Today, academia teaches that the earth is billions of years old, and that all living creatures evolved from lower life forms. The bible teaches that in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and each creature after its kind. Many of the most highly educated people in our culture have been brainwashed through their studies, so that they do not recognize the truth, and it is hard for them to accept that there is a creator God who is able to work outside of nature. They pride themselves on their intellectual acuity, and in their pride, they see no need to humble themselves before a God that they do not know, or recognize.

As in previous cities, Paul stirred up such a commotion that the people brought him to the authorities. The Areopagus, at the height of the Greek empire, this was their Supreme Court. At the time of Paul's visit, its only responsibility was to settle matters of disagreement over philosophy and religion. These great thinkers were curious about Paul's teaching, so they wanted him to explain it fully, most likely so that they could pick it apart.

Still they gave him permission to speak. When we share our faith today, we are unlikely to make much headway unless people want to hear what we have to say. That is why it is effective to ask a person's permission to tell them about your faith. If they say yes, then they will be more likely to listen. Paul began with something that he could see that he and his audience had in common. The Athenians recognized the existence of an unknown God, and Paul insisted that he was revealing the truth about a God to which they already paid homage.

In order to be effective in our witness to intellectuals, we need some insight into their thinking. It is helpful to educate ourselves in their area of expertise, so that we can have a starting point to make a case for Christ. Those who subscribe to the big bang theory as the source of all that exists can be challenged with questions like, what caused the big bang, and what existed before the big bang. Intellectuals rely upon the laws of physics, and those same laws may be used to show the existence of God, if we understand those laws sufficiently, and make our case effectively.

The unknown God, to whom Paul referred, was a God unlike any of the Greek gods. Paul's God made everything that exists. He is Lord, actively engaged, and involved, in all things, and in the personal lives of individuals. Athens was a city filled with temples to the various gods, but the unknown God did not live in temples, nor did He need help from humans. He is sovereign over all. Paul's teachings were in direct conflict with Greek philosophy of both parties.

In verse 28, Paul uses another tool to make his case. He quotes their own poets, who were noted for their wise sayings. When we witness to intellectuals today, it will be helpful if we can quote a respected authority as we make our case for the gospel. If we can quote a respected

authority, in their field of study, that has come to saving faith in Jesus Christ, that will be a bonus.

Using these points of common agreement, Paul presents the unchanging gospel so that his audience might have an opportunity to be saved. The outline of his sermon goes something like this. There is one true God who has revealed himself in creation. He calls everyone to repent of his or her sins. Everyone must give an account to Jesus, whom God raised from the dead.

Paul focuses on the fact there is a day coming when Jesus will judge each person. His authentication of the gospel is that God raised Jesus from the dead. Notice that the gospel message hinges upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The fact of the resurrection is proof of salvation in Jesus name, and the assurance of eternal life.

The idea of the resurrection of the dead was repulsive to Greek thought. Death resulted in the shedding of the body, and to their way of thinking, no one would want to be resurrected. This is why the bible says that some of them mocked Paul. His message did not make good sense to them. Others though, wanted to meet again and discuss this matter, because they thrived on philosophical debate.

Once Paul left the Areopagus, the bible indicates that some men went with him, and were saved. One man is mentioned by name, as is one woman. So at least a small handful of people responded to the gospel message in faith. The question we have to ask is did they establish a church in Athens? We have no extra-biblical account of an early church in that city, and the only other New Testament reference is in 1Thessalonians 3:1, where Paul indicates that while they were in Athens, they sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to encourage the church there. This tells us that Silas and Timothy did join Paul in Athens at some point. So, Paul's ministry in Athens must have lasted for some time, which was longer in duration from the impression we might get from a casual reading of the text. For these reasons, I think that there was an established Christian church in Athens, contrary to what some of the commentaries say.

From Athens, Paul moves on to Corinth, where Silas and Timothy will later join him. Corinth is the final major new city on the second missionary journey. The missionaries visit some of the already established churches on their way back to Antioch.

While I feel confident that there was a church established in Athens, the text suggests that there may not have been as many converts as in other cities. If this is true, the only logical reason why more people did not get saved is because it was a tougher audience. Paul tried to reach the upper echelon of people in the Greek culture. These were the most highly educated citizens who prided themselves on the worldly wisdom they possessed. They were skilled at debate, so that they could question the gospel, and oppose it powerfully, with human arguments.

A person, who thinks they already have all the answers, is much less likely to see God's wisdom in the gospel, than a person who understands his or her need, and thus is willing to surrender their life in faith. But, the wisdom of the gospel, and the wisdom of God's word in general, confound the wisdom of the world.

People, who think of themselves as more learned, may dismiss our arguments without serious reflection. The truth is that whether rich or poor, whether educated or uneducated, no matter what a person's station in life, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and no one will be saved apart from faith in Jesus Christ, His sacrifice on the cross, and His resurrection from the grave.

From the beginning God had a plan to save us through the sacrifice of His Son. We receive His forgiveness through confession and repentance of our sin. We receive salvation by trusting Jesus into our hearts as Savior and Lord. Once saved, the Lord seals us with His Holy

Spirit, so that we live in Him, and He in us. He gives us new meaning and purpose. He builds us up in the faith, and promises us eternal life. Everyone who hears the gospel has an opportunity to receive God's grace. Since God's judgment is coming, there is an urgency to come to Christ while the door is open. If anyone would like to know more about how to be saved, I would welcome the opportunity to answer your questions.