

The Rock: 08-01-2021**Community series****First reading: None**

Title: How to engage the culture

Scripture: Acts 17:1-15 (page number in black bible)

Theme:

Engaging and understanding your audience and the times.

Introduction:

I remember years back I was invited to speak at a church in MA, and I took along the young adults of the church and made a weekend of it.

After-all it was Boston. We spent the weekend there enjoying the city and I remember being on Newbury street headed toward the south end, when we came upon a couple of young people on the street corner.

I remember because of what they were holding. They had big signs which read: Turn or burn. God hates.. and sprinkled around their big posters were scripture verses.

To complete the whole deal, those holding the signs would confront, not attempt conversations, but confront anyone who would engage with them. Both believers and unbelievers.

Thinking back on that moment, I do not believe that they had any intention of introducing people to Jesus, but rather, they were simply looking to argue their "rightness".

I am convinced as well, that they never really understood Acts 17. Because what we find there is a pattern of evangelism and cultural engagement and understanding. There is an opportunity to stand on the hill and rail against the darkness, or be light and salt instead.

As we close out this short series, I want us to see how Paul engages, and how the people respond. It's very interesting actually, because we discover that the gospel does one of two things.

Depending on how it is received it, the gospel causes conviction leading to repentance and celebration. Or, it causes anger and rejection leading to riots.

I'd say it does the same thing today, even if not on such a scale as we see in the narratives that Luke records for us here in Acts.

The Story:

Just as a quick aside as we get going this morning, I want us to notice that nowhere (except when talking to those who already are saved and should know better), does Jesus, Paul or any other New Testament writer stand on the street yelling, "turn or burn".

Onto our first stop at Thessalonica. Fresh off of the beating and imprisonment at Philippi, Paul and Silas get right back to work as they find a new place to speak:

-Acts 17:1 (ESV)

"Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews."

This is a pattern for Paul, since the gospel was for the Jew first, and Gentile second. Not a prejudice thing, just a Biblical fact. So, we always see him whenever possible, go to the synagogue in town and begin there.

Opening up the Old Testament to show them that it all points to Jesus:

-Acts 17:2-3 (ESV)

"And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ."

For almost an entire month, Paul unpacked the old testament, proving to them that not only was Jesus Messiah, but that He had to suffer and die, and then rise again for them.

The rising again thing, they understood, liked even. It made sense to them, but this dying on a cross thing was too much for them to buy into.

It wasn't that they were just being obstinate, it just didn't make sense, and actually didn't line up with what they saw in the Bible

-Deuteronomy 21:22-23 (ESV)

"And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance."

It was a problem for Paul too before his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Knowing that, Paul taught the Galatian church and the Jewish believers there that it actually did make sense if they understood that Jesus became the sacrifice for us:

-Galatians 3:13 (ESV)

"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"

I share these this morning because we, as believers, can never forget, nor can we ever assume certain things.

#1 -Never forget that the story of the Bible and especially of Jesus and the cross is weird. It's hard to believe.

Unless the Holy Spirit softens a heart, and that heart listens, this story, to the unbeliever, is rubbish and foolishness.

It's why, if you know Christ as Lord, grace and patience to explain, and to listen is so important. Turn or burn never gets you to that place of an open conversation.

Paul, we see here, just does what he can to open up and unpack the Scriptures. Why?

Well, #2 -Never assume, that's why. Paul never assumed that everyone he was speaking to believed what he did.

Just because they were in Synagogue every Sabbath did not automatically make them believers. That is hard for us to digest, and I don't say it with any disrespect.

But let's all be careful, to examine ourselves first - Are we converted? Are we truly saved? Paul encourages this, even in himself.

-1 Corinthians 10:12 (ESV)

"Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."

All the stories in the Scriptures are given as examples and encouragement so that we know how to stand, to examine ourselves in order that we don't fall away, and to know that it's God, through His Holy Spirit who is able to make us stand.

-2 Corinthians 13:5-7 (ESV)

"Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves,

that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test. But we pray to God that you may not do wrong—not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed.”

This is so important that he repeats it! The encouragement here is to be careful, be focused, and don't shipwreck your faith.

There was a time in the early 2000's where I had done that very thing. Angry at God, not able to sort things out, and decided to give it a go on my own. A bad choice for sure.

I learned that Jesus is the real deal in that desert time, because as much as I was not wanting to hold onto Him, he never let go of me.

Paul's goal was to prove that Jesus is the real deal, and he does it in Thessalonica:

-Acts 17:4-5 (ESV)

“And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of

the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd."

Some believed, and some got mad. The ones who got mad decided to get anyone on the street who was willing and then grabbed anyone they could to take their anger out on.

Jason, I have to assume a new convert, was the unlucky guy who they got a hold of.

-Acts 17:6 (ESV)

"And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also..."

Jason posts what we would call a bond so he can get out, and they shuttle Paul and Silas off down the road in the middle of the night, to a place called Berea. Good times, huh?

-Acts 17:9-10 (ESV)

"And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to

Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the Jewish synagogue.”

They pick up right where they left off on Paul’s evangelistic and riot tour.

N.T. Wright tells a story of a bishop who, preaching on Paul’s ministry, said that he felt he was doing something wrong. The Bishop, not Paul.

He said, that it seems everywhere Paul went there were riots, and everywhere I go they serve me tea.

Not that we are looking for riots, at least I’m not, But we are looking for good leaders to emulate, because they are steady, biblical and confident.

It seems in Berea, finally, Paul got a group of folks who did just that:

-Acts 17:11-12 (ESV)

“Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.”

Paul simply does what he has always done. Preach Jesus, use the Bible to prove that

He is in fact the Messiah, and does it with a good result this time.

Instead of getting mad and throwing rocks, they look to the Bible themselves to prayerfully study, and as important, listen to the Spirit in their hearts illuminate the Word for them. That led to belief in Jesus.

Two things we see about the gospel today, and back then too. First, it can be made so over complicated by how we preach, that people can't even begin to understand what 's being preached by us theological eggheads, that they walk away shaking their heads.

Second, the gospel is preached in such a convoluted and wishy-washy way, that people walk away wondering how they will ever get that wasted time back. Never having a clear picture of who Jesus is and why we need Him.

Both are very unhelpful. When done right however, we find in the narrative here that there are always those who get mad, and even go out of their way to make sure others are mad too.

-Acts 17:13 (ESV)

"But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they

came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds."

Just remember the promise of Jesus when this happens:

-John 15:18 (ESV)

"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you."

Once again, they ship Paul off. No protest, no loud argument. Paul has a mission and a place to be. Winston Churchill once said: "You will never reach your destination if you stop and throw stones at every dog that barks."

Great advice! So, off he goes to his next stop:

-Acts 17:14-15 (ESV)

"Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed."

Paul heads out on his own, but Silas and Timothy, now joined with them, stay in Berea. I can only assume, that they stayed as leaders to help support those

new believers and get them set up and pointed in the right direction.

Then they would follow on and meet up with Paul. Already in Athens, he isn't idle (no pun intended). He tours the city taking in the sights.

-Acts 17:16-17 (ESV)

"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."

He examines the culture to understand the ground he is on and the people he needs to talk to, and gets to work. In the Synagogue first, and then in the market place.

Once again, it gets the attention of those in charge, and Paul ends up before the philosophical think tank of the ancient world.

Let's look at what he doesn't do here as he lays out his defense. He doesn't use the Scriptures, AT ALL.

Instead, he starts in their world, using their culture:

-Acts 17:22-23 (ESV)

"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."

Working toward Jesus from that point, and this one is actually the most important encounter for us to see. It is also the hardest one for some of us to receive as well.

The Church, Christianity, the Gospel is no longer the prevailing cultural narrative. It actually hasn't been for years, and to start from that place of understanding is to fail as we try to talk to people about Jesus.

I would even go so far as to say that we look much more like Greece (Philosophy perspective) and Rome (politically), in our time, than we are prepared to admit.

(Russell Moore quote)

Paul knew he was not "the normal one" in that room, but he also knew it was ok, and he was right where God wanted him to be.

Engaging them in the way they understood. He did not holler and yell. He didn't make posters with Turn or burn. He simply said, "What you worship in ignorance, I want to help you understand clearly."

That all of your idols are empty and useless. The creator does live in temples, or in carved stone images, but rather you can find Him in the human being, the person names Jesus.

That the days of living in ignorance and unaccountability are now over. The clear truth and promise of the Gospel are preached by Paul.

-Acts 17:30-31 (ESV)

"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."

They were willing to hear him until he talked about the resurrection. Paul, the Apostle, one of the best examples of humble leadership you will find, never backs down from this truth.

His heart breaks for anyone who does not, and will not believe. To those who do

believe, this promise is the aroma of life. No matter how bad we have been, Jesus saves! Paul knew this.

To those who don't believe, the promise is the aroma of death. This too, Paul knew and that is why he would not stop preaching about Jesus.

As followers of Jesus, let's all prayerfully ask that He give us a heart that is burdened and broken for the least, the last and the lost.

Then get to work where ever God sets you down. Sorting out the idols of our age, even in our own lives.

Paul has left us with left one of the best examples of the hands and feet of Jesus we can find. Starting with examining ourselves first, then reaching into our wider culture we can share Jesus in a way that works.