

Provoked to Witness for Jesus

Acts 17:16-21

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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.

My message is titled, “Provoked to Witness for Jesus”.

When you look at the world around you, do you see this world as deeply broken?

Have you ever been troubled and disturbed when you see evil and debauchery around you? Even those who don’t believe in God believe that there is something wrong with the world.

The evangelist D.L Moody once said he saw this world as a wrecked vessel. In Genesis chapter 6 verse 5, God *observed* the condition of the world “*The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*”. The world is broken because people are broken. People are broken because of sin.

Now, it’s one thing to be troubled and distressed about how bad things are around us and do nothing about it. Would you want to be known for zeal and compassion or apathy and indifference?

Here you see, in this passage, Paul is on his second missionary journey and is waiting in the city of Athens for Silas and Timothy. And as he looks around, Paul sees the city full of idols. And Paul is *provoked* in his spirit.

Here is a little bit of a history and context. In Jerusalem, the Temple Mount was the most significant structure for the worship of the God of Israel. The Jews were very particular in not allowing any image, idol and any other form of worship than what was prescribed in the Mosaic Law. It is said that Pilate once was going to try to have a parade in the streets of Jerusalem with a bust of the emperor and a riot was going to break out. Also, Paul is a Pharisee and a follower of Jesus Christ.

I believe Paul is provoked not because he knows that idolatry is forbidden according to the Mosaic Law and that idolatry is sin. Paul is more concerned about God's honor and glory than just idolatry. Paul is concerned about the glory of the gospel. Paul wants to proclaim the One and True Living God. Paul knows that God is bigger than any idol or temple that men make out of their own imagination for worship. So the real issue is worship. Here are a few passages as to why Paul may have been provoked.

1. Deuteronomy 4:15-19 *"Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, ¹⁶ beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, ¹⁷ the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, ¹⁸ the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. ¹⁹ And beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven. God made the animals, the sun, the moon and the stars for the enjoyment of humanity. God has allotted these things for all. So God is offended when these things are idolized. Anything that is worshipped more than God is idolatry.*
2. Another text for Isaiah 42:8 *"I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols"*
3. And it's not just Paul who has been troubled by what he saw around them.
4. Abraham's nephew, Lot was distraught by what he saw around him. Peter writes about Lot this way – *"righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked ⁸ (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard)"* 2 Peter 2:8
5. The Psalmist grieved at the sight of lawbreakers. *"My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law"* Psalm 119:136

6. Hear the words of the Psalmist again “*My zeal consumes me, because my foes forget your words.*” Psalm 119:139

So, Paul has an holy exasperation, a godly provocation or a divine distress if you will at the sight of idols.

However, Athens was very pantheistic. The people of Athens were not Jews or Samaritans or Jewish proselytes. There were Gentiles, Epicureans and Stoics.

The most significant structure in Athens was the Parthenon at the Acropolis - devoted to the goddess Athena. Ancient Athens was lined up with temples dedicated to Ares – god of war, Athena – goddess of wisdom and war, Nike - goddess of victory, Zeus – god of thunder and many more.

And, just as Jerusalem had rules for worship, Athens followed strict rules too about which gods would be allowed in their city. The council of Areopagus was the approving body. Areopagus is simply the hill of the god Ares. Pagos means hill and Ares is name of the god the hill is dedicated to. Mars is the Roman name for the god Ares. Hence the name Mars Hill. If anyone introduced a god in Athens without the permission of the council, they could be put to death. One of the famous Athenians was the philosopher, Socrates. According to historians, Socrates was charged with being “*guilty of not recognizing the gods recognized by the city, and of introducing other new divinities*”. The council found him guilty and put him to death in 399 BC. Paul, is very likely aware of the history of Athens.

Paul knows that proclaiming the Gospel in Athens is not the same proclaiming in synagogue. He also knows he could be put to death if introduces a new god.

How does Paul introduce the Gospel to these Athenians?

Look at verse 17.

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.*

Dia-legeto is the word used in verse 17. This is where we get the English word dialogue. Paul has a dialogue, a discussion or reasons with the Jews, with the devout people (worshippers) and with the locals in the market – agora. How frequently? Every day! We are not told the content of his dialogue with the people but we enough of what he said.

Look at verse 18 through 21.

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.

There were two major schools of thought, philosophy at that time. The *Epicurean* and the *Stoics*. The *Epicureans* believed that *pleasure* was the chief goal of life. And the *Stoics*, on the other hand, believed in harmony with nature or being one with the universe, in rational thought and in self-sufficiency. Stoics were pantheistic. From a Biblical worldview, Stoicism is a pagan philosophy.

And, here Paul introduces Jesus and the resurrection but the locals think Paul is introducing foreign gods. They have no idea. They don't know who Jesus is and they think Jesus and the resurrection are two different gods. To them Paul is like a babbler. Some one who picks up stuff here and there and babbles and cackles. Athens had seen many people like Paul who bring something new and strange. But Paul has grabbed their attention and they want to know more. They want to know the meaning of Paul's teaching.

So what do they do?

In verse 19, we see that “*they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?”* Took him is being modest. The language indicates that they grabbed him and take him to the Areopagus.

This is not good news for Paul. Paul could end up like Socrates if they found him guilty introducing new gods. However, Paul's mission is to be true to the Gospel and be a witness. How does Paul respond?

We will have to pick up next Sunday to look at what Paul presents and how he presents. It is a fascinating Gospel presentation.

But here are at least three things you could apply as you consider witnessing:

Be motivated by God's glory.

It is easy to start denouncing when you are provoked by sin and the depravity of others. But having a big view of God, being motivated by the glory of God and having compassion for others is key to witnessing.

Be open to reason and dialogue in witnessing.

Sometimes, your witnessing may involve just listening and asking questions. And that is what Paul does. He reasons with the locals everyday.

Present Christ.

Paul did not water down the Gospel. He preached Jesus and the resurrection. When you get an opportunity to witness never pass up an opportunity to present Christ, his death and resurrection.

As I conclude this morning, I want to briefly mention about the emotion Jesus felt when he came to Martha and Mary when their brother Lazarus had died. In John 11:33, when Jesus saw Mary weeping, "*he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled*".

Another translation says Jesus was indignant or outraged. This is very similar to how Paul felt (provoked) in Athens. But, later in John 11: 35, we see "Jesus wept".

Indignation of sin must be followed by compassion. Outrage of evil must be followed by sympathy and grief. Otherwise, we can quickly become self-righteous.

If there is anyone who has never experienced the compassion of Christ, you will not find a more compassionate Savior than the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, Jesus is offended when you sin but when you repent and trust in his death as payment for your sin, you will see that his compassion has no rivals.

----- Discipleship Questions-----

MESSAGE SUMMARY: Provoked to Witness. Acts 17:16-21

HEAD: These questions help you examine the truth of God's Word.

1. What do you observe in Paul's reaction in Athens and how he shares the Gospel?
What can we learn from Paul's approach? John 11:33-35

HEART: These questions help you wrestle with what you believe.

2. When you witness for Christ, do you believe your displeasure of sin should be followed with compassion for others? Why? What are dangers in being outraged by evil and not being kindhearted?
3. What is God convicting you of and to believe in light of this message?

HANDS/HABITS: These questions help you bring the truth into your everyday life and develop behaviors that change your habits.

4. For personal reflection: What will you change to witness about Christ to others?