

Acts Chapter 17

Gospel for the Intellectuals

How would you approach bringing the gospel to people who have never heard about Yahweh, the God of Israel, haven't heard about the concept of Messiah. So you can see the way Paul brings the gospel is completely different and this has got great relevance to the way we share the gospel because we live in a society where they don't know much about this Messiah, no point quoting Old Testament. So this would be quite a useful guide for us to how to share the gospel.

1 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. **2** And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, **3** 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."

Now he is taking to Jews. So if you talk to Jews you got to tell them this is the Messiah. You talk to non-Jews they would be wondering what is Messiah.

4 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.

So there was a great response. He explained and not only that some of them were persuaded. So a lot of people think sharing gospel, just telling the story and then you walk of. There is a lot of explanation to do. There is a lot of rhetoric, there is a lot of explanation, there is some debate, and there is some reasoning involved. It involves the mind that is how the Holy Scriptures goes in your mind, you need to be able to debate that, persuade that. So there is a persuasive element there as well.

5 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. **6** 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, **7** and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." **8** And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. **9** And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

Then they went to the next place which is called Berea.

10 The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. **11** 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. **12** Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.

So the attitude of the Bereans were quite different. They were actually people who are more noble described, because they received the word with eagerness, not only that they were not going to take Paul's word just as Paul's word. They took the scriptures and actually examined it. Examining means this is a legal process, a legal process where you bring witnesses into the court case and then they present evidence. So therefore when you bring the gospel, the actual process should be examining scriptures. That is how the word of God actually reaches people's hearts. So this is the Berean attitude. The Word of God is the only thing that will keep the church alive.

Many years ago Roman Catholic Church was actually brought down by many false practices. One of them was the sale of indulgences. At that time you could actually sell these pieces of paper and this one can remit one sin. If you actually buy this you will be able to spend less time in purgatory. Some of things were due to interpretative problems. If we look at the Greek word *metanoia*, in Acts the proper interpretation of this is repentance, the Romans translated it Latin Vulgate as *paenitentia*. When you translate *metanoia* as *paenitentia* it means something that you do, in order to pay for your sin. So that introduces the idea of confession using a man to forgive your sins. Then they have whole problem with the mass. When the celebrated the mass, only the priest could celebrate the mass because the priest changes the elements into actual body and blood of Jesus Christ, which separates people from God. All these practices were put in including this idea of purgatory. Purgatory is never in scripture and they put this in to gain control over the people until Huldrych Zwingli came along who is from Switzerland, along with also Martin Luther, reformation and he actually was a passionate pastor who loved the Bible. The people in Swiss were very much like the people in Berea. The way their reformation came about was quite different from the English reformation for example. He was very convicted with the word of God and he actually presented the Word of God directly doctrine of justification by faith and he debated with the Roman Catholic bishops at that area in First Zurich Dispensation & Disputation in 1523. At the end of this debate what happened was the magistrates passed judgment in favor on Zwingli, they directed him to continue to preach the holy gospel as here to for and to proclaim the true divine scriptures. All the other pastors and preachers in the city and the country were not to preach anything which they could not establish by the Holy Gospel and other divine scriptures and to avoid personal controversy and bitter names. This is amazing. You actually have a place not controlled by rulers and kings but you have a city council that actually says, you only follow what is in the Word of God. If we look at the English Reformation, the only reason why England became protestant, King Henry VIII was catholic; he has no child except Mary born of Catherine of Aragon. So therefore in order to get a child he must have some male child, must have another woman. The pope refused to grant annulment of his marriage as Catholics don't believe in divorce. Catherine of Aragon was the aunty of the holy Roman Emperor in Germany and that was related to the pope and so because of that if he annuls he is in trouble. So what happened in the end he actually pulled the English church out of the control of Rome in order to get married. He married Anne Boleyn. They produced children and then they chopped of her head. The English Reformation came not because of scripture but because of political expediency.

This is a good example for the church. The churches authority, whether you vest in deacons or elders are only limited to Holy Scriptures, if you got any elder or pastor who goes past scripture immediately the people of God should be examining the scripture and should bring them to account. This is a very interesting account historically how it actually ties in with the Berean Christians.

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 babbling wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

This idea of dialogue at that time is me explaining a concept, you disagreeing and then we are going back and working whether the premise is correct or not. So we are actually correcting each other, explaining each other. It is not like a debate. So therefore Paul has to challenge the culture, he has to challenge the world view. When you actually talk to non-Christians they come from a completely different world view. They see the world different from you. If you have been in the church in 10-20 years, the way you see the world and interpret through the lens of scripture is different from the way a non-Christian will see. So therefore you have got to go and what he did was he went to Athens the Agora which is the marketplace. They have no social media, so the way they get news is to go to the market and there they will discuss the news, they will get commerce, they will get programs, everything happens in the Agora. So he went to Agora where he mixed with the people there and this was the opportunity for him to share. Then he went out to Mars Hill in Athens to discuss gospel with the more intellectuals and there are two kinds of philosophy that were there. Epicurus and the Stoics and they were saying, some people says, what is this babbling wishing to say. Babbling is a kind, the actual word refers to a seed picking bird, and it is not a very nice word. 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.

So here is an intellectual society and Paul never took the view these intellectuals will not believe, I will bring the gospel to the masses. He also interacted with them to interact with their culture, very-very important. The irony is that they called him a babbling, because this is the predominant culture of the age. Within 250 years they will be called babblers. It turns 180 degrees away.

22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. **23** 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.

Paul is very clever, he walks around. He sees all these idols, he gets very upset (*if you love the living God and you see idols you would be upset*), if you are unmoved then I think you got a problem. So he is upset but yet he seeks this opportunity because they have got altars to all sorts of gods. So Paul took this opportunity to look at this one and use this as a bridge. **So in evangelism we always need to build the bridge.** You need to find something in common with the non-Christian when you are talking about in order to jump off from that. Second thing you need to do is that you need to address, understand that all cultures address society's aspirations. Every culture will have to deal with these three things.

- happiness,
- you don't want suffering
- you don't want to die.

How do they actually deal with it?

These were all developed 300 years before Christ. The Stoics are like moralist nowadays who believes in absolute moral values which are virtues. Epicureans were the pluralist.

EPICUREANS:

Epicurus actually was a philosopher who believed the most important thing in life is to be happy, but this idea of hedonism isn't today's idea. He has got four points he believes in.

- God is nothing to fear.
- Death is nothing to worry about.
- It is easy to acquire good things in life.
- It is easy to enjoy all the terrible things in life.

A lot of these things were applied today.

Gods if they exist is nothing to fear. The Greeks were afraid of natural disasters. Epicurus was a very bright man, even at that time believed that all matters been of atoms and he reckoned that the gods were not responsible for natural disasters. The gods were self-sufficient, happy, not bothered with human affairs, and it is unnatural for man to sacrifice to them as they cannot be influenced by man. It is actually true. If the gods are so powerful, so self-sufficient, why you bother whether you bring offering to them. Because of that you don't have to bother with the gods.

Death is nothing to worry about. How does he get through this idea of death? There is no immaterial soul, no worries about eternal punishment. He does not believe in the soul, he says life is here. Death cannot affect the living or the dead. It cannot affect the living because you are not dead. There is no logic to lament the loss of future happiness after death and suffering is therefore mercifully limited. A lot of people spend a lot of time worrying about what happens to life beyond death and what Epicurus says; if you look back do you sit

and worry about life before birth. Death is same thing as before you are born, you don't know what you were and after death is the same. So death is nothing to worry about that was his thinking.

It is easy to acquire good things in life. He says all things in life depend on your desires. You have got desires, natural and unnatural. Natural desires are necessary and unnecessary. The unnatural desires are unnecessary. He divides them off. So what he says is that the natural and necessary is all you need for life which means your big mac, your drink, your house and your friends that is all you need in life. If you all of this then it does not matter what kind of house then you will be happy. Actually Paul says this in Timothy 6, but Paul mentions it in a different context. So he is actually quite cluey. He says this is all you need.

Now imagine each one of them will bring certain degree of pleasure and if you just focus on all of these, it is all the happiness that you are going to get. Let say, you are eating vanilla ice-cream you get a certain degree of pleasure; your desire is being satiated. When you actually change and eat other ice-cream, it is varying types of pleasure but still pleasure. What if I put a gold leaf on top, still the same kind of pleasure but it is just varying kind. So what for you work so hard and sell your house to eat 300 dollar bowl of ice-cream with gold leaf. So if you actually modulate your life and work on desires which are very simple then you will be happy in your life.

Epicurus was a very simple man. He only lived on bread and water and lived in a cave. Off and on somebody will bring him a pot of cheese, he will eat the cheese and he says because I live a good life I enjoy simple pleasures. This extenuates the little luxuries of life that people bring. So if we will bring you cheese you enjoy the cheese so much better because you live a simple life. That is how he becomes happy. Sex is a natural desire but unnecessary. Sex with anyone is good for pleasure; love is not good as created unnatural desire. So if you actually see today's society, have you heard of friends with benefits? You can have sex as much as you like because you are actually fulfilling a desire but don't love them, because at the moment you love them you will get headache and will get all sorts of trouble in life. So Epicurus believes in free sex, as long as you fulfill your desires you can have friends with benefits.

Unnatural and unnecessary desires, the love of money, you want to be famous, you don't have powerful. If all these things are unnecessary and unnatural because they will be never be an endpoint. These desires are unnatural and unnecessary. So therefore don't focus on them. So this is Epicurus life dream.

It is easy to endure terrible things in life. He says acute pain is sharp but short. So you get shot by a gun sharp pain but very short. You either die or not die. Chronic pain is long but dull. If the pain is too much you kill yourself and this will limit the pain. So therefore it is easy to endure the terrible things of life. So take joy in philosophical conversation.

STOICS:

Stoics were developed about 300 years before Christ and their contemporary equivalents today are Buddhism and Taoism, very similar in their approach. It came because of the fall of ancient Greece; people suffered a lot during that time, so there was a need to cope with the suffering. They believe in the universal divine principle. There is a divine principle, it is like Star Wars, the force unleashed. The universe itself is God and the universe is pouring into it so which means God is in the fabric of society and we have bodies like animals but we also have souls and our souls are part of the universal principle of the force. That is why you have Star Wars, there is this force which Jedi will tap upon and if you align yourself with the force, if you go into the good part of the force then you will be happy. If you go to the dark side of the force like Darth Vader then you will be unhappy ultimately. So the whole idea of life is to achieve virtue through a set of morals, aligning yourself to the force. They believe in predestination which means fate is all predetermined, you cannot change events, but you can change your attitude.

So you come to this fall of Greece and everyone is suffering, they cannot reverse that but what they can do the Stoics believe, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius they believe that if you cannot change events, there is a very fatalistic world for them but we can change our attitude towards events. Some things up to us and some things are not up to us. Things beyond our control, actions, opinion of others, reputation, health and wealth, these are things that you can control opinions, moral judgment, belief, desires and goals. These are the things if you focus on these things you will be happy, if you focus on these things you will be unhappy. So you are a slave if you focus on things beyond control, actions and opinions of others.

If other people think you are a bad person, as long as you don't bother what they think it does not matter to you that is what Stoics do. They alter their opinion. They alter their attitude towards things and that is how they cope with life. So the whole idea of stoic indifference, it means non-attachment, you are not attached to money, not attached to power, not attached to fame, so therefore you become happy, you will not seek for them. If they come you will enjoy, if they are taken away you will not miss them. So the stoic virtues are wisdom, courage, justice and self-control. They actually practice misfortune. If you come inside the airplane the first thing you do is go for the last seat at the last part next to the toilet, so when somebody upgrades you to first class you are happy. So they actually practice misfortune, choose the worse things in life so when the good things happen you will be very happy. Practice what you fear.

Marcus Aurelius was emperor of Roman Empire writes, *"live a good life if there are gods if they are just they will not care how developed you have become but will welcome you based on the virtues you have lived by. If there are gods and they are unjust you should not want to worship them. If there are no gods you will be gone but would have lived a noble life that will live on in the memories of your loved ones."* This is his philosophy. In the end it is all useless. Alexander the Great and his driver both died and the same thing happened to both of them.

Paul comes to this and he understands this. Paul comes in and he writes

24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man,

The first thing he tells you is there is a creator and the creator creates every single thing. He is a very powerful God. Not only that he transcendent and personal, he is Lord of the heaven and earth. He is not part of the universe. He is not the universal principle. Universal principle in Greek is called 'Logos'. This force is actually called Logos. John in his gospel writes, in the beginning was the Logos and the Logos was God. So he is saying that Logos is a person. John used the word Logos because the Greeks believe in the universal principle Logos, all these thing you have been worshipping all along and thinking about they control the whole world actually is a person rather than a principle. When they say the force be with you, the Logos is with you, actually is God with you. So takes their concepts and he Christianizes them.

You actually have contrast with Greek gods, Greek gods are born out of chaos, they mate, they reproduce, children, they battle, they are jealous, they are capricious, they are actually just like humans. It is just like human beings projecting our problems and our stories onto higher beings. They are like us but with power.

The supreme power, the lord of heaven and earth does not live in temples made by human beings, so which means they are independent, very-very important. That means these Gods don't depend on you bringing sacrifice, don't depend on you trying to bribe them to give you a good life. This is how big his God his, this is a supreme power, independent and he also sustains life. So before you go on your trip overseas on a boat you don't have to sacrifice, a lot of these Greeks they fear the gods, they didn't adore the god. So what Paul is trying to do is that he painted a huge picture of God, such an awesome picture of God that this is the kind of God you need to adore, not the kind of kind you are supposed to fear

25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 26 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,

This means he is sovereign over history, he controls every person's life and not like the Greek gods. Prometheus is a Greek god. As a god he found that fire was something that man never had so what he did, he stole fire and gave it to mankind. His father Zeus was very upset, he condemned him to be chained for the rest of his life and everyday a big vulture will come and pick at his liver. So it was an eternal suffering until one day Hercules came and released him. So gods are fighting each other, they are jealous of each other. Our God which Paul describes is totally beyond the realm of human experience. The difference is this god however big it is, it is also more imminent.

27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,

That means man is created by God for fellowship. Not only you have such a huge God but this God wants to fellowship with us. He created us that we should seek him and have a relationship with him. So this Logos is actually Jesus Christ, instead of a principle, it is a relational God. So here you have a problem with philosophy, you cannot fulfill the deepest longings of a human heart. Epicurus is empty pleasure, the stoics cold and impersonal. The moral absolute is actually a person and the way to get the moral absolute is actually the relationship with this person. It is a huge God but a personal God which cannot be worshiped by idols. So therefore being of God's offspring we ought not think that divine being is like gold as gold or silver or stone and the image formed by the art and imagination of man, because this God is so big right from the beginning the Bible prohibits anybody from making an idol of stone, for reinventing God in your own image as it were.

So then how does he persuade them that this is the real God?

27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, **28** 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."

So you can actually sense him. Because your own poets have written that you actually are his offspring and in him we live and move and have our being. So he sees some part in their culture that actually tells them that there is a God and he applies that emotionally to them. That is why they have this unknown God, because they sense there is some sort of God up there.

Albert Einstein wasn't a Christian, he was a man of science but this is what he writes. "*I believe in Spinoza's God, who reveals Himself in the lawful harmony of the world, not in a God who concerns Himself with the fate and the doings of mankind...*"

He believes in some kind of God through the laws of physics because he is a scientist.

There was a lady philosopher which Tim Keller tells of who actually went to Africa and she ministered among the African women and who were actually quite subjugated there. They didn't have many rights and she fought for them to have rights and the people in the village were very upset and they told her, why should you come and tell us what to do. She says, I feel woman should have equal rights to men. But they say we also have moral feelings, we believe women are below men and they should do all our dirty work for us. As she worked among them the question was, were there moral feelings better than hers, who is right. In the end the way she ran the church, the way she ran the community that she was involved in she still insisted equal rights for women, why, she simply imposed her values. Now the presence of absolute moral values indicates to us there is a presence of God. Moral feeling, some people say I feel this is good or this is bad can be derived of a survival tool for evolution but moral obligations is evidence of a universal God. It is just like an altar to unknown God. That is what Paul is getting at.

THE PREMISE

If there is no God there is no moral obligation. If there are moral obligations then there must be a God. Here we have altar to unknown god, equal rights for women, they sought of somehow tell you that your premise is wrong. There must be a God for you to have moral obligations to apply across the world.

Richard Dawkins is a famous atheist. He writes his premise "*The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.*"

You are okay to say that, because you don't believe as a God. If you believe as a God that means this God will impose a moral order then you cannot say that. So he is an atheist. His premise is that there is no God, so therefore I can do this. However, if you see him write against Christians. "*The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.*"

All those are moral judgments. Now how do you get moral judgments when you believe there is no God in the first place? This is what people do all the time. If you believe this then you must change your premise. If you believe in all this you must believe there is a God. So that is what Paul is trying to do to show that the way people live and feel indicates that they actually believe in this higher God and that is how we when we actually debate with non-Christians we need to look at their premises and show from the moral order or the order of the universe that their premise is actually wrong.

For example, if you look at the holocaust, if the Nazi Germans had won the war would the holocaust be justified and morally correct thing to do?

So whichever side of the fence you are there is actually right and wrong which is absolute. Every human being no matter which society, which culture you come from there must be moral absolutes and this moral absolutes actually tell you there is a God. So that is what Paul is trying to get at.

GOSPEL CHALLENGE

29 Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. **30** The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, **31** 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."

So here is the gospel, he has fixed a day. There is a big God and the big God is going to judge everyone. He straightaway talks about sin and judgment and he is asking people to repent and it goes through one man, Jesus Christ, by raising him from the dead, very-very straightforward.

The gospel nowadays sounds like Epicureanism or Stoicism coming back again. The Christians are now doing it. The churches nowadays are very big but are the people in church really Christians. We have actually opened the door very wide in church, so everybody comes in but we don't know whether they are actually Christians. If you look at most modern churches, we attract people to come in by all sorts of things. We put the bar very-very low, we hardly talk about sin, we hardly talk about judgment, and we preach the gospel and we ask you to come to Jesus so that you can get peace and love and joy. Look at what Paul writes, He has fixed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness. Sin and righteousness right up front, very horrible thing.

So the most important part about what Paul teaches us today is when you go and share the gospel you must share about a big God, a Holy God, and a powerful God who has a demand upon your life.

It is like a train is coming, if you don't get out of the way you will be crushed that is how you should present the gospel.

It is this huge God who is now commanding you to submit to him in love and he died for you and you give your life to him. Who do we know this is true?

Jesus rose from the dead. Solid hard facts. Now when you present the gospel presented like Paul the last challenge that is the true gospel, not the watered down version where they sing song, Jesus is standing by your door please come and your tears and all that, this is emotional manipulation. Paul never does that, Paul points to you about the holiness and expansiveness and the beauty of God and he challenges you to repent and come. So this is the gospel.