

The Rest of the Story

Studies in the Book of Acts

“We will move the world not by criticism of it, nor conformity to it – but by combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God”

Vance Havner

Text

Acts 17:15-34

Topic

Paul is invited to share his message with the intellectuals on Mars Hill but is verbally attacked when he mentions the resurrection of Jesus

Title

Mars Attacks

Acts 17:15 So those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed.

Acts 17:16 Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.

Acts 17:17 Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the *Gentile* worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there.

Acts 17:18 Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babblers want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.

Acts 17:19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine *is* of which you speak?"

Acts 17:20 For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean."

Acts 17:21 For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

Acts 17:22 Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious;

Acts 17:23 for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you:

Acts 17:24 God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands.

Acts 17:25 Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.

Acts 17:26 And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings,

Acts 17:27 so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;

Acts 17:28 for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'

Acts 17:29 Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising.

Acts 17:30 Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent,

Acts 17:31 because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."

Acts 17:32 And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this *matter*."

Acts 17:33 So Paul departed from among them.

Acts 17:34 However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Introduction

There are a lot of things that provoke us Christians. The latest is the upcoming movie, *The Golden Compass*. The movie is an adaptation of the first novel of a fantasy trilogy called *His Dark Materials*. In the books, a malevolent governing body called "the Church," which answers to the "Vatican Council," is known to kidnap children for experimentation. With the help of a golden compass that reveals a coded answer to any question asked by the user, the main character, by the trilogy's end, gets to the bottom of the missing children and kills a character called "God." The author of the series of novels, Philip Pullman, is an avowed atheist who specifically cites his hostility to C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* as a motivation for writing his own series.

(If you want to get up-to-speed on the movie we've copied some information from an apologetics website. It's available on the table in the Entry).

A lot of things provoke us. I want to talk about our being provoked. In our text we are told that while the apostle Paul walked around Athens **his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols** (v16). The Greek word is *paroxuno* and can mean *provoked* or *irritated*. It can also mean *urged*, *spurred-on*, and *stimulated*. The KJV translates it **stirred**.

The Greek culture in Rome was promoting an idolatry so gross that it **provoked** Paul, stirring him to do something about it.

You and I walk around our cities and, via various media, the world. As we encounter the world we are going to be provoked. We should do something about it.

What did Paul do when he was provoked? ***He did what he always did!*** He preached the Gospel. Specifically you're told twice that he proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus Christ (vs18 & 31).

When you and I are provoked the action we should be stirred to is to preach the Gospel. It is the power of God to save.

I'm not saying we can't boycott; or write to our elected representatives; or get involved in certain causes or movements.

I am saying that too often we do those things instead of continuing to live and share the simple but life-changing Gospel of Jesus Christ. We try to take on the culture using its methods rather than trusting in the spiritual weapons at our disposal.

We can learn two things from Paul about how to handle getting provoked. I'll organize my thoughts around them: **#1 Get Provoked But Don't Lose Your Focus**, and **#2 Get Provoked But Don't Lose Your Footing**.

#1 Get Provoked But Don't Lose Your Focus (v15-18)

You expect a missionary or a minister to stay focused on preaching Jesus. It's their calling and often their vocation. But we've seen in the Book of Acts that every believer, regardless their vocation, was

talking about Jesus to people they encountered at home, in the work place, and in the marketplace. All believers are lay-missionaries and lay-ministers. Thus we need to sharpen and maintain our focus – especially when provoked.

Acts 17:15 So those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed.

Paul had been run out of Berea. He escaped to Athens where he was awaiting Silas and Timothy.

Acts 17:16 Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.

There were literally thousands of **altars** to various gods. But it was more than that. Everywhere Paul looked he could see men and women pursuing idolatry as they lived in ignorance of Jesus.

Walk around Kings County and you'll see a significant number of idolatrous statues. And you'll see many other things that represent the empty idolatry of nonbelievers.

Your **spirit** should be **provoked**. Not to anger; not to frustration; not to threatenings. It should be provoked to want to share Jesus Christ with those who are lost and rushing headlong towards Hell. It should stir in you – in us – a passion for souls.

Acts 17:17 Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the *Gentile* worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there.

As was his custom in every city, Paul went to the Jewish synagogue(s) and taught Jews and the Gentiles who worshipped there about Jesus from the Scriptures. He also spent time in the public **marketplace**, called the Agora, preaching publicly.

Paul was one of those crazy street preachers you sometimes encounter! God may call some of us to a street ministry. More likely He just wants us to interact **daily with those who happen to be** where we are. In those interactions we want to maintain our focus on Jesus and their need to receive Him as their Savior.

Acts 17:18 Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.

The particular philosophies are not really all that important. Epicureanism and Stoicism were prevalent at that time in Athens. Philosophy is a vain attempt to describe the human condition apart from God's revelation of Himself in the Bible.

Some called Paul a **babbling**. It's a word that describes a bird pecking at seeds. It came to be used of crows. When used of men it meant they were making a lot of noise but saying nothing important.

Others thought Paul was proclaiming new gods that were **foreign** to them. They thought that both "**Jesus**" and "**Resurrection**" were the names of two new gods!

Provoked, Paul proclaimed. He never lost his focus on the Gospel as the power of God to save. While there may be many other things we can do to affect our world, none is more significant than simply sharing the life-changing message of Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead.

#2 Get Provoked But Don't Lose Your Footing - (v19-34)

You're focused on Jesus. Then people start to question you. If you're not careful you can begin to lose your footing by watering down the message. Paul gave us a great example of maintaining your footing and standing on solid ground.

Acts 17:19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine *is* of which you speak?"

Acts 17:20 For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean."

Acts 17:21 For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

Ares was the Greek god of war. His Roman name was Mars. Thus the **Areopogus** was the Hill of Ares or Mars Hill. It was also the name

of a Greek court. Though limited in power because of Roman rule, the **Areopagus** still had great influence. If this was an official hearing they could have forbidden Paul to go on preaching.

In a moment of sarcasm Luke told us that the **Athenians and foreigners** wasted their time acting as though they were seeking the truth when in reality they just wanted to debate. It's sad when we take sides rather than seek truth.

Believe it or not, some scholars criticize Paul for his sermon on Mars Hill. They think he beat around the bush. Paul's talk on Mars Hill is a masterpiece of how to share with someone who knows almost nothing about the God of the Bible. It will help us if we can identify a few general principles.

First we see that Paul was courteous:

Acts 17:22 Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious;

Acts 17:23 for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you:

He complimented them on being **very religious**. Religion is not a good thing, but it was their thing and so he began where they were in their thinking. Christians should not be afraid to start wherever people are to explain who Jesus is.

Next we see that Paul was contemporary. He knew what was happening in their culture. Each of us must remain contemporary without becoming contaminated.

Next we see that Paul was creative. He had encountered an **altar** of the **unknown god**. In case they missed one and he or she got angry, they had this generic altar. It was foolishness, but Paul didn't ridicule it. He used it to try to reach them.

These Athenians had no knowledge of the Old Testament. So Paul appealed to an older, more universal revelation of God: Creation.

Acts 17:24 God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands.

Acts 17:25 Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.

Special creation by the God of the Bible is the only truly viable explanation for the universe and our place within it. It's not a matter of faith. Special creation better accounts for the scientific facts we have discovered over the centuries. And it's the only account that has an eye witness!

Acts 17:26 And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings,

Modern science is almost as smart as Paul was in the first century. Geneticists have proven all humans descend from a single mother. Paul already knew that from reading the Bible. He also knew the father and both of their names! It was Adam and Eve.

History is not the random rise and fall of various civilizations. It is following a course preset by God. Its purpose is to redeem fallen humanity back to a personal relationship with God.

Acts 17:27 so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;

- being changed to bring change -

This is an altogether remarkable statement. Though mankind is lost and therefore **groping** in the dark, God has shed sufficient light in creation that they might **find Him** if they **seek** Him. No matter where a person is born anywhere at anytime, God is **not far from** him.

Men are capable of seeking God. God will give more light to those who seek Him. Creation is a partial revelation of His nature. To those who seek He will give greater revelation and (ultimately) His name.

Acts 17:28 for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'

We've said that Paul was courteous, contemporary, and creative. Here we see he was conversant. He was familiar not just with the

contemporary culture but with its influences. He had read some of their **poets** and could quote them. We need to be careful but we cannot ignore the influences behind our culture.

Acts 17:29 Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising.

By **offspring of God** Paul didn't mean every human being is a child of God. His context, remember, was creation. Every person receives their life from God and is made in the image of God. That image was marred by sin and, so, we must be saved by Jesus Christ.

Idolatry is logically inconsistent. Since it ought to be obvious to everyone that creation demands a Creator, we cannot make gods. God made us!

Acts 17:30 Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent,

The **times of ignorance** refers to men who are groping in the dark with only creation as a witness. **Overlooked** means God is longsuffering with men who only have a partial witness in creation. He held (and holds) men accountable only for the knowledge they have. **Now** that Jesus has come and the full revelation of God's plan is expounded God **commands men everywhere to repent**.

Acts 17:31 because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."

History is moving towards a conclusion. All men everywhere will one day give an account of their **righteousness**. Am I righteous enough to go to Heaven and spend eternity with God? The biblical answer is "No." There is none righteous. All have sinned and fall short of God's standard, which is perfection in the heart. Thus God ordained Jesus Christ to come into the world of men and represent mankind. Those who believe in Him are declared righteous. Those who reject Jesus will stand before God in their own self-righteousness. It won't be enough to get them into Heaven.

We can be sure all this is true because of one amazing historical fact: Jesus Christ died but rose from the dead!

Acts 17:32 And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this *matter*."

They **mocked** the idea of a resurrection. It's funny, really. Here were a bunch of supposed intellectuals who believed to some extent in fanciful mythologies. When confronted with the resurrection of Jesus, a proven historic fact, they treated it as if it were mythology.

This was no watered down message. Every sentence refuted some aspect of the prevailing philosophies and religions in Athens.

Acts 17:33 So Paul departed from among them.

Acts 17:34 However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

The Gospel proved its power as **some** were saved.

Paul had debated them without berating them. On Mars Hill, confronted by centuries of philosophy, mythology, and idolatry, he kept his footing and stood solidly on the revelation of God in creation and in Christ. We can't criticize him for not using the name of Jesus because he was interrupted just as he was getting to it!

- being changed to bring change -

Until the Lord comes for us there will always be things that should provoke us. Movies are a good example. Last year it was *The DaVinci Code*. This year it's *The Golden Compass*.

When provoked our first thoughts ought to be how we can show others a true and accurate representation of the grace, mercy, and love of God for lost mankind. Then we should see ourselves as missionaries and ministers who are sent to share **daily with those who happen to be** where we find ourselves out in the world.

2 Timothy 2:24 And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient,

2 Timothy 2:25 in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth,

2 Timothy 2:26 and *that* they may come to their senses *and escape* the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to *do* his will.

