

“A Different Kind of Witness”
Acts 17:22-31
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Some of you may remember that my doctoral work was in the area of baptism. I explored the wisdom of the early church as a means of enhancing the way we think about preparing new believers for baptism and a lifetime of Christian service. My concern was that while Baptists talk a lot about how we get in the water and when, we offer less formal teaching related to baptism than just about any other Christian tradition. We do great teaching, just not right before or after baptism.

So, I looked to the early church for help, and I chose the late fourth century C.E., especially the baptismal instructions of John Chrysostom. The reason I chose that period was that in the first few centuries, preparing for baptism meant preparing for death, not death to self and old ways, but death. Christianity was a new minority religion at odds with Roman culture and many believers in the tradition from which it had grown, Judaism. We have our challenges, but we do not often risk death in this culture because we follow Jesus. Early believers did.

By the late fourth century, things had changed. In Antioch, where Chrysostom was bishop, there were roughly 300,000 people, about half of whom were Christian. It was no longer dangerous to be associated with Jesus. But the Christian community was divided, much like it is today. There were many rival groups, including some we might know – Gnostics, Manicheans, Marcionites, Arians. So, I thought this period might have more to offer in the way of principles that apply to our time.

I have a similar feeling about the story we have read today from Acts 17. This is the story about Paul’s witness to the people of Athens. The time was different than ours, and the city was older, but the cultural realities were very similar to ours. This was a city with great traditions in art and education, and the people were spiritual in their own way, they just weren’t interested in Christian faith. Paul knows they are different. So, he employs a different kind of witness.

Paul, Peter and the others have a certain way of giving witness to their faith - a bold, almost in-your-face way - especially to fellow Jews. They are a bit like the French castle dwellers in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* who turn away the English in search of the grail with all sorts of insults. The Apostles point out to each Jewish audience their folly in not recognizing Jesus as the Christ and in playing a part in his death. It is pointed criticism, biting in its impact.

But in this story, among the Athenians, Paul employs a different kind of witness - still bold, but not as much in-your-face, more accommodating. And though some question the effectiveness of this witness, there is much to learn here, much that applies to our context.

So, to set the stage, Paul is in Athens, the ancient city with so much history, probably in the Royal Stoa where court cases are heard, just down the hill from the Acropolis. The setting alone indicates that this will be both a religious and political conversation, and as Paul begins to speak, this reality is underscored. To speak of the gods and their altars is both a religious and political act.

As he speaks, Paul stands in the midst of the Areopagus, the council, and begins by affirming the Athenians for being very religious. He says that as he has walked through the city, he has noticed the many objects of worship they have, even one to an unknown God. We might think he is being facetious, and he is not saying their faith is just like his, but he seems genuine. He even quotes some of their authors – the Stoic Seneca with the phrase “in him we live and move and have our being” and the poet Aratus with the phrase “for we too are his offspring.”

What Paul is employing here is a classical rhetoric technique called *captatio benevolentia* (Latin for “winning of goodwill”). We might say that he is trying to curry favor or that he is buttering up the people! Why would he approach them in this way rather than use the direct assault he does with fellow Jews? Because he is looking for common ground and trying to create a willingness to listen.

With fellow Jews, he quotes scripture because they already have the Hebrew Bible as common ground. And with this common ground established, he can focus on differences, like understanding who Jesus is

and how he fulfills scripture. But with Gentiles, there is no such common ground, there is no shared scripture, there is a need to make some point of contact and create a willingness to listen. Or to state the case more simply, as my mother-in-law used to say – sometimes you can attract more flies with sugar than you can with vinegar!

Paul doesn't compromise his faith. He doesn't say things he doesn't believe. He simply affirms what he can and establishes common ground as a strategy of persuasion. The strategy makes sense here.

And it makes sense for us. Rather than approaching people outside the church, especially those who claim an interest in spirituality but not organized religion, in a condescending way, as if we own God and they don't, we might begin by affirming their interest and asking them to tell us about their beliefs. Rather than approaching those who function with a scientific worldview as if they are wrong, we might begin by noting the reality that there are multiple paths to truth and affirm the path of science. Rather than approaching artists and musicians as if their work is alien to matters of faith, we might begin by noting the sacred nature of life as a whole and affirming art as a means of exploring the sacred.

In the realm of talking to people outside the church who claim an interest in spirituality, there are many wonderful resources like the late Gethin Abraham-Williams' book *Spirituality or Religion – Do We Have to Choose?* to guide our thinking. When it comes to talking to people with a scientific worldview, *The Language of God*, written by Francis Collins, the former head of the Human Genome Project and the current head of the National Institutes of Health, offers a wonderful guide for viewing science and religion as complementary paths to truth rather than inevitable rivals. For those who want to dig deeper, Old Testament scholar William Brown's *The Seven Pillars of Creation* is compelling.

And when it comes to artists and musicians, we might consider some recent thoughts of Bono, the lead singer of the Irish rock band U2. Bono is pleading with those who write contemporary Christian music to include the depth of the psalms in their writing, to explore subjects found in the psalms like peace, protection, laughter, hubris, rage, tears, humility and unity. And he pleads for honesty about human experience. But he also insists that we need not label all music as Christian or not

Christian. “Creation screams God’s name,” he says, “So you don’t have to stick a sign on every tree.” Just because a song isn’t explicitly called a “Christian” song doesn’t mean it isn’t deeply spiritual in nature.

What if we were to take this posture in our witness, the posture of *captatio benevolentia* that Paul employs in Athens, the posture of finding common ground and affirming what is good in others? How many bridges might we build, how many doors might we open, how many relationships might we develop, and thus how much more progress might we make in introducing people to Christian faith?

But while Paul begins by affirming the Athenians for where they are, he doesn’t leave it at that. He also points out what he thinks they are missing – a relationship with the God who made the world and an understanding of all that God accomplishes through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul doesn’t compromise his witness, though he does shape it in a way that can be heard. He is as bold as ever!

He makes known the unknown, saying that the God who made heaven and earth does not live in shrines made by human hands. The obvious reference is to the shrines the Athenians have to their gods. He says that God is near to us and has placed a desire within us to seek God. Augustine of Hippo echoes this thought with the claim that our hearts are restless until they rest in God. Then, he says that while God overlooked human ignorance for a time, God now calls us to repent, because the day is coming when we will be judged by the one God raised from the dead (that is - Jesus).

So, Paul does not say, “You folks have it right, go on with your lives.” He affirms what is good about their perspective, and then tells them what they still need to know. He tells them about Jesus, though he doesn’t explicitly use his name, and he calls them to repentance. Thus, while the packaging changes, the message does not.

The implication for us is that somehow somewhere in our conversations with others we come to care about, we verbalize the

essence of Christian faith – that God’s nature is revealed in Jesus, that we are all loved with an everlasting love, that mercy and acceptance are available, and that there is hope for life beyond death. Now, it can’t be just this if we want our witness to be effective. We have to share something about our personal experience with God, and each of us has a unique experience. There is no one pattern to follow.

I grew up outside the church. In adolescence, I developed a normal spiritual yearning and asked questions about the meaning of life, whether this is all there is (especially after my grandfather died), whether there is some Great Being out there. I saw a production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and was attracted to the Jesus story. So, when a neighbor invited me to his youth group, assuring me there were some good-looking girls in the group, I went! Our motivations are almost always mixed, but I had a genuine spiritual yearning, and the Jesus story attracted me, indeed did more than attract me, transformed my life with the help of a community of believers very much like this one.

This is the story I have to share, the only story I have to share. It is not like most of yours. It has advantages and disadvantages for communicating with others, but its particularity is important. Faith talk without a particular form is useless.

But though we must include our personal story and allow the essence of the Gospel to take on flesh, we must also share the essence of the Gospel - in our words, as we understand it, without feeling a need to produce results. The outcome is up to the other person and God. But still, we share the message like Paul does, even in Athens.

So, what are the results of Paul’s different kind of witness? He is more accommodating at the beginning, but he comes on strong at the end. But what are the results? Some claim that this sermon is a dud and thus we should not employ this strategy of witness because there is no reference to thousands being converted. But does another strategy work better in this setting? We have no record of a large church in Athens.

There are some converts – Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus; a woman named Damaris; and others. Early church tradition suggests that Dionysius is the first bishop of the church in Athens. We cannot confirm this claim, but it is intriguing. We know nothing else of the woman, just that Luke has a persistent interest in naming the women who are integral to the work of the early church. But the point is - while the masses are not swayed, some are, a church is started, and in some contexts, that's just how it works. Even in Jerusalem, the numbers may be inflated, but in some contexts, faith just grows at a slower pace.

A colleague in a former setting grew up in Japan as a missionary kid. She talked often about how her parents labored for three or four decades to form a small house church with a couple dozen members. Was their ministry ineffective? Were their sermons duds? No! Their context was challenging, Christianity is a minority faith in Japan, it grows slowly. But it grows, those who believe have their lives transformed, and those who give witness daily, waiting patiently, not depending on immediate and flashy results, are used by God.

In many ways, our context is moving in this direction. Church participation is following the European pattern we scoffed at for so long. Urban areas especially have more and more people who claim no religious tradition. And while there are new endeavors that seem to attract people in good numbers, it is not clear who these people are (as in, are they new believers?) or how long they will stay. What is clear is that nothing is making a dent in the overall decline in church attendance.

But all is not lost. God is still alive. The church will have a future. We may just need to adjust our strategies of witness and our thinking about metrics, what numbers mean and how we measure our ministry.

In the end, it's not about success, it's about faithfulness. Like Paul, we have a calling to give witness to our faith. Like Paul, we are wise to tailor our witness to our hearers. Then, like Paul, we must trust God with the results.