

Faithful Evangelism, Part 1

Acts 17:16-23

As we engage in evangelism, as we engage in the task of defending the faith, we need to start with an attitude of submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The Lordship of Christ, that's the starting point for all biblical evangelism and that's what 1 Peter 3:15 is referring to. In submission to Christ, we are responsible for sharing the Gospel he gave. We're responsible for sharing the Gospel that he gave in the way he prescribes us to give it, not in our own way. You don't get an "A" for effort for running a race if you run the wrong direction. You're no help in fighting the war if you don't fire your weapon, and if you don't fire it in the right direction, or if you don't fire it at the right time.

In the same way, someone preaching an incomplete gospel or preaching an accurate gospel, but in a combative manner, that person can seriously undermine the cause. They can cause friendly fire. They can bring reproach on the Gospel, on the Lord Jesus Christ. What's worse is when someone thinks they've

been saved by an incomplete or inaccurate gospel and they enter the church, they become a member, they start exercising influence. That's bad. That's why, like everything else in the Christian life, we need to do whatever the Lord prescribes in the way he prescribes it. We're not trying to win the approval of man. We're not trying to show people how culturally relevant we are, how openminded we are, how nice, how tolerant, that's not our aim. Pleasing the Lord Jesus Christ, that's our aim. That's our goal. Winning the argument is not even our aim. Pleasing Christ is our goal.

So the Lordship of Christ has to govern what we say to the unbeliever and also how we say it. The Lordship of Christ determines both the content of our proclamation and also the manner of our argumentation. Both are important. Evangelism, everything we say to an unbeliever has to run through the grid of this question: Is this faithful to Christ or not? Is the content of what I'm saying faithful to his Gospel in all its fullness or not? Is the way I'm saying this, the manner in which I'm saying this, the tone I'm expressing it, is it faithful to Christ or not? Set apart Christ in your heart as Lord. Fear him.

You know what the fear of the Lord does as we set him apart as Christ as Lord in our hearts, you know what the fear of the

Lord does for us? It frees us from the fear of man. It makes us a bold and courageous witness for Jesus Christ. Also, it makes us winsome and gracious in the face of provocation. When people blow back at us, it's all right. We can handle it. We serve Christ. You're insulting, not me as ambassador, you're insulting the King. Yeek! I hate to be you on Judgment Day. You know, we teach about repentance because you're in trouble. I love you. I don't want you to face his wrath. It teaches us how to speak and what to say.

We, as we think about this, 1 Peter 3:15, we speak to the unbeliever with gentleness. We speak to him with respect because we want to maintain, before our Lord Jesus Christ, a good conscience, a clear conscience in how we speak. Because the Christ that holds us accountable for if we evangelize, he also holds us accountable for how we evangelize. We want to make sure that he is pleased. That's what's important.

You say, You know, how do I? How do I do that? I'm a little bit nervous now. You know I thought I was doing okay, but now I'm concerned. You know what? We're going to help with that by turning into our Bibles in Acts 17, Acts 17. Because we're going to look at a biblical illustration of someone who modeled faithful evangelism for us, the Apostle Paul. This is the

Apostle Paul in his encounter with the Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill. Acts 17:16-34.

For the Apostle Paul, the Lordship of Christ meant that he preached the Gospel in humility and boldness. He was bold with those people, but he was also humble and meek. Some people believe those two virtues cannot coexist. One who's humble won't be bold. One who's bold certainly can't be humble. That's not true at all. That is an error promoted by the modern-day tolerance movement. It's turned everybody into the niceness police.

That attitude gets into the church, as well. Some people think that the greatest commandment in all of Scripture is, Thou shall be nice. I have searched in vain to find that commandment in Scripture: Thou shall be nice. We are to be nice. We are to be kind. We are to be winsome. But eventually, we've got to tell people that they're sinners. They don't want to hear that. Eventually, we've got to tell people that they're an offense to a holy God. And they need to repent or face the judgment of eternal wrath in hell.

Folks, I don't care how you say that, it's not going to be perceived as nice. No matter how you say it. Say it with a smile on your face. It's not going to look nice. But Christians who

refuse to say those hard things, they're not preaching the Gospel. They're not being helpful. They're not being faithful. They're denying the Lordship of Christ by spreading a partial Gospel. And not only do partial Gospels not save, they do further damage by inoculating sinners against the truth of the Gospel. They make people think they're saved when they're not. That's not helpful.

So we want to be winsome in the way we speak. We want to be pleasant and cordial, respectful, yeah, even nice. But the goal is faithfulness. The goal is faithfulness to our Lord. We need to preach the Gospel in a spirit of meekness, which means humble boldness. Now when we proclaim the Gospel in humility and with boldness, we honor the saving content of the Gospel, and we put the transforming power of the Gospel on display in our lives. We show them how we've been transformed by how we even speak and that pleases the Lord, that pleases Christ. It keeps us faithful to Peter's command to set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts whenever we give an answer.

That's not an easy task, especially in a hostile culture. Especially as we've been used to being able to be evangelicals freely. It's no problem to be evangelical. There's even some modicum of respect that people have and deference; yesterday,

years ago, no more. We have to adjust to that. We have to change. We have to change not because of the changing culture. We have to change and conform to what Scripture requires.

God has given us biblical examples to show us how to do this well, how to be wise. Paul's example, Acts 17:16-33, it's so helpful. And as we work through the text here, I want to expose the theology behind his evangelistic example, okay. I want to bring some of that to the surface. Faithful evangelism starts with the proper motivation. Faithful evangelism starts with the proper motivation.

Take a look there at Acts 17:16, "Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens." Stop there for a second. What's he doing in Athens? What's he waiting around for? Well, he'd just been unjustly imprisoned in Philippi, then released. But he was unjustly imprisoned in Acts 16 and he saw a great work of God happen there, but among a precious few believers, some women having a prayer meeting. Lydia and her people, they came to Christ and some others were saved, a Philippian jailer was saved. Others as well, they were brought into form the nucleus of that little church start-up.

And after that, he went to Thessalonica and he was run out of Thessalonica by the Jews, by the city authorities. And again, he'd seen, as Acts 17:4 says, "Some of the Jews were persuaded." And he saw a "great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women," they were saved. That's encouraging, to be at opposition though. Next, Paul fled to Berea, where he found more noble Jews, those who were willing to test his teaching against the Scripture. That's nobility for you. And as a result, Acts 17:12, "Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men."

Again, Christ-rejecting Jews hunted Paul down in Berea and they chased him out of Berea as well. But some of those new Berean brothers, brand new Christians, they escorted Paul to Athens. And that's where he waited for Silas and Timothy to join him. You might think that his recent experience have, experiences have prejudiced him against the Jewish people, have kind of caused him to more favor the Greeks. He watched more Gentiles respond to the Gospel than the Jews. So was God closing the door on the Jews? Were the pagans nobler than the Jews? Were they closer to the Gospel? Let's keep reading.

Look at verses 16-17, "Paul was waiting for them in Athens, his spirit was provoked," when, "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.” Stop there. So after his experiences in Philippi, Thessalonica, then in Barea, you might think Paul would’ve abandoned the strategy of taking the Gospel first to the Jews and then to the Greeks, Romans 1:16. Paul doesn’t do that. He doesn’t abandon that strategy. He doesn’t change his evangelistic strategy to get better results. God called him as an apostle to go the Jews first and then to the Greeks. It doesn’t really matter what he sees on the surface. He keeps doing what he’s supposed to be doing. Faithful to the Lord, you see. He stays the course. He first enters the synagogue.

As much, though, as he cares for his own people, the Jews, God has given this apostle love for all people, all people. In fact, he’s become known as the apostle to the Gentiles. He left the confines of the synagogue to evangelize the lost in the marketplace, reasoning about the Gospel there every single day with whoever happened to be there. Most of the Jews hated him, wanted him dead. Most of the Gentiles considered his Gospel foolishness. They were inclined to be indifferent to him, just hear him as one part of the clutter, part of the white noise from the culture, even to turn hostile if they felt he was

denigrating sacred traditions, he was affecting their bottom line.

So what kept him coming back? What kept him faithful to the task? What motivated him? It's that sharp little word in verse 16. It's the word, provoked, provoked. Paul's "spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols." Now the ancient city of Athens was the heart and soul of Greek culture, heart and soul. Athenian influence, it, it declined in Paul's day, in the Greco-Roman world because the Athenians, they had backed the wrong side in a recent civil war. So, was, the city was somewhat out of favor with the Empire, but Athens was still the cultural center of Greece. Athens was the connection that Greeks had to the ancient Greek heritage.

Its intellectual elite upheld the philosophical traditions of a more glorious past. Four major philosophical schools called Athens home. You had Plato's Academy, Aristotle's Lyceum, the Garden of Epicurious, and the Painted Porch of Zeno. So Zeno, Epicurious, Aristotle, Plato, all that influenced Athenian culture. And the philosophers considered themselves superior to all the masses because they were superstitious. They were pagan. They were idolaters. And these masses were extraordinarily idolatrous. Athens was full of idols. One ancient writer named

Petronius said, Quote, "In Athens it was easier to find a god than a man." Idol on every corner. Kind of like us in our country, church on every corner. Athens, idol on every corner.

To the formal philosophical schools, to the idol-loving masses, you can add synagogue Jews, God-fearers, neo-Pythagoreans, all kinds of cults, Mithra cult, all this stuff. Athens was a scene of spiritual distraction. It was a scene of moral relativism. It was a scene of intellectual subjectivism. And all of that led ultimately to skepticism, to agnosticism. And so many options to chose from you could pick whatever flavor of religion and philosophy you found appealing.

Not too dissimilar from our own country, is it? Same thing. Not unlike middle school, is it? High school? Not unlike university campuses. Not unlike all of our friends and neighbors. People we work with. Not unlike the people we do business with, the marketplaces we visit. They may not bow down to statues of gold and silver. They may not visit temples, make sacrifices like they do in the East. Make no mistake, their hearts are just as idolatrous. They bow to modern gods of progress, power, autonomous self-expressions, sexual freedom.

Notice Paul's internal reaction there in verse 16, because that gives us the insight we need to understand his motivation

for evangelism. He was not indifferent to their idolatry. He wasn't a tourist snapping photos there in Athens. All the cool statues and religious artifacts, Hey, let me show my family. "His spirit was provoked within him as he saw the city full of idols." The word provoked, *paroxyno*, if you're familiar with the word paroxysm, which is like a spasm of violent emotion, it comes from that Greek word. Paul wasn't just a little irritated here. He's angry. He's angry! Their idolatry upset him. It disturbed him. It aggravated him. Why? Why couldn't Paul just have a little bit more tolerance? Why couldn't he just be understanding? Oh, that's their culture. That's their traditions. Why couldn't he just have like a libertarian Colorado live-and-let-live kind of an attitude, right? I mean, When in Rome..., right?

Paul couldn't do that. He couldn't do it. He's a Christian. He's a Christian. Paul was, first of all, zealous for God. He was zealous for God. His zeal for the glory of God provoked hatred for false worship. He couldn't stand to see people worshiping false gods. 1 Corinthians 10:20, "What pagans sacrifice to they offer to demons." He knew what was behind false worship. It's demonic. Their demons who are being celebrated and their doctrines are being celebrated and promoted. He couldn't rejoice in that. He couldn't be

indifferent to that. Those spirits set themselves up as substitutes for the true God. He had a passion for God. God is the only being that deserves all worship. And since he's the only being in the universe that deserves all worship, he's the only being that ought to receive all honor and glory and praise from men. So Athenian idolatry provoked him.

We remember what it was like to worship idols. 1 Corinthians 12:2, Paul says that "You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however, you were led." Titus 3:3, "We ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another." "We all once lived in the passions of our flesh," Ephesians 2:3, "Carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."

Look, we get that. We understand. But we're not sympathetic to the mentality of sinners. We're not sympathetic in siding with them against God. We can never say, hey, I get it. I understand your anger against God for this reason or that reason or this trial or that trial. Your anger against God makes perfect sense. No, it doesn't. We can't say things like, Yeah, I

don't understand why God allow evil either. No, we can't say, that's just something we take by faith. It doesn't make sense, but... We can't say that. We can't sympathize with rebellion.

You have to sympathize with God. All your sympathies need to be devoted to God and God alone. That's what it is to sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts. God and his interests are your interests. You sympathize with God and God alone. We may empathize with the lost condition of sinners because we were once sinners. We understand that. We understand the futility. We understand banging our head up against the truth. We understand how hard it is to suppress the truth in unrighteousness and hold it down. We understand the shame of a guilty conscience. We understand how it's destroyed our life; sin has destroyed us.

But our sympathies are never with the devil, never with his people. Our sympathies are always for God. We are provoked at false religion. We're provoked by false philosophies. We're provoked by what they're teaching our children. It strikes out against our good and awesome God. And that's the first reason, because we love God. We're zealous for him.

But secondly, Paul was zealous for people. He was zealous for people. He was passionate for them. His zeal for the hearts of men provoked a sincere love for men's souls. He wanted to see

them delivered from the darkness of sin and error, that they, too, might walk in the light of holiness and truth. Paul loved people. He was zealous for their repentance, to be delivered from the bondage of sin.

We know Paul's zeal for God's glory, his love for sinners motivated his evangelism because verse 17 says, "So he reasoned in the synagogue and in the marketplace." The word, so, is what we call an inferential conjunction, all right, inferential conjunction. It's often translated, therefore. Therefore, based on the provocation within his spirit, as a direct result of his zeal for God and his love for sinners, Paul evangelized.

What did he say? Well his habit was to preach the Gospel from the Scriptures. He went right to the revealed word of God. Earlier in chapter 17, if you look back at verse 1 there, I'll show you what he said. "When they passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. 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.'"

Okay, so it was a full Gospel presentation. It wasn't slipping somebody a tract, hoping they get it. This was investment on his part. It was getting involved. And he didn't do it just once, as some kind of special outing, some kind of special event. This is a way of life for him. The imperfect tense of the verb, he reasoned, which is also translated, he disputed, he discussed, but the imperfect tense of that verb indicates he was doing this continually, over and over and over again.

Evangelism is just Paul's way of life. It's just who he is. Why would he talk about anything different? This was no prepackaged Gospel presentation using cartoons and some Gospel-like tract. This was full on conversation, full on dialogue with people, interacting with their ideas. I hope this resonates with you, this internal motivation. I hope you get this. Faithful evangelism starts with the motivation of zeal for a holy God, whom we love, who saved us, who's given us truth and revelation, who's given us wisdom, Job 28, right?

Glorious God. We love him. We love these people. We look around at these people and they're just destroying their lives. They're walking off cliffs and they're breaking up into pieces at the rocks below. We watch young teenagers and twenty-

somethings and they're just getting into sin and they're loving it, they're reveling. They're rejoicing in all their newfound freedoms. They get away from mom and dad and all the restrains and they just indulge. And it looks cool for a while, but then the thirties come along. And then the forties. And now they're left with a really broken life. And it hurts. It's painful. And it destroys the next generations of relationships. It kills people.

Look, we love God, and we love people. That's what drives us forward to preach the Gospel. The expressions of sinfulness and idolatry, they provoke us. We see God being denied. We see our fellow man being enslaved and deceived. That motivation drove Paul, drove him into conversations with unbelievers no matter who they were, no matter where they were. He wanted to see sinners saved, God glorified, so he reasoned, he dialogued, he confronted, he conversed with whoever the Spirit put in his path. He just started sharing the Gospel, spreading seed like a farmer, just spreading it out there. He was indiscriminate in scattering that seed of the Gospel. He threw it around everywhere. He reasoned with everyone. It says there in verse 17, "With anyone who happened to be there." You know what, he trusted God. He knew God was sovereign over all this. So he just trusted God. He knew God would put the right people in his path.

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God and God alone initiates conversion. He uses an accurate Gospel as the means to effect salvation. So Paul just spoke it, let God take care of the rest.