

Faithful Evangelism, Part 4

Acts 17:24-34

Go ahead and turn in your Bibles to Acts 17, the biblical message of faithful evangelism involves: teaching, implications, and exhortation. You have to teach them. Then you have to show them the implications of that and then you have to exhort them to repentance. If you're not doing all three of those things, then you may not be evangelizing.

Let's start in verse 24 with the teaching. The teaching. "The God who made the world and everything in it." God is the creator. He's the creator, man's the creature and that simple fact implies a whole lot, folks. As creator, God is the source; man is derivative. God is infinite and unlimited; man is finite and limited. God is all-powerful; man is rather small. When we start with the God the creator, rather be, rather than becoming proud in our knowledge, rather than becoming proud in our might and our strength, our accomplishments, we acknowledge, along with King David, Psalm 8, verses 3-4, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which

you have set in place, what is man that you're mindful of him and the son of man that you care for him?"

We're awestruck by God's power. We're in awe at the magnitude of his being. He, who is above and beyond the stars, he, who is the creator of time and space and everything that fills space, folks, that's what's at stake in the battle for the beginning. In protecting the literal interpretation of the opening chapters of Genesis, we cannot hedge on that at all.

Notice the next phrase in verse 24. "The God who made the world and everything it in, being," what that's word? "Lord," right? "Being Lord of heaven and earth." He's Lord. God is absolutely sovereign. And not just over man, but over all spirits, angelic, as well as human. God is not one among a pantheon of deities. He does not share his glory. He's sovereign over all, Lord of heaven and earth. Lord of angels and demons. Lord of kings and princes. Lord of governments and armies. He's Lord over the massive humanity and over every individual human being, as well.

Not only that, but as the creator of all, as Lord over all, look at verses 24-25, "God does not live in temples made by man." Obviously! "Nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and

breath and everything.” God is immaterial spirit. He’s unbound and limitless. He’s uncontained and infinite. And that means his Lordship extends everywhere his spirit extends, which is absolutely everywhere, including the immaterial parts, if I could put it that way, the immaterial things of individual men and women, like their thoughts, their emotions, their attitudes, their motives. He’s sovereign over that, too. He’s sovereign over all flesh and spirit, material and immaterial, as well.

Man’s spirit is contained within his flesh, bound within the limitations of space and time. And since his very existence comes from God, his, since his soul was created by God, man is utterly dependent on God for everything. He gives nothing to God to other men. He gives nothing. He’s the originator of nothing. He receives everything.

God is not like man at all. God is self-existent. He is self-sustaining. God is the giver. He’s the source of all existence. He’s the source of all sustenance. He has no need, he has no weakness, no unfulfilled desires. He is the God, verse 26, “who 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.” Whereas God is infinite and limitless, man is finite and limited. He’s hemmed

in by the God who “determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling.” He’s contained.

Why did God order his created world in such a way? Why does he limit man? Why does he set boundaries around mankind, pointing us continually to his sovereign authority? Is this a way to make man gravel, to crush man in the dust and rub man’s nose in his creaturely limitations? Not at all. Not at all. Paul knew that introducing the Athenians to God as sovereign creator, as provider and sustainer, as all-powerful, all-knowing, everywhere present, this was a foundational truth to lead them to the knowledge of salvation. It’s not about crushing man, except to humble him and point him to heaven. They needed to be humbled under the might and the power of God before they’d ever look up to see that they need him.

Here, at this point, is where Paul starts to unpack the implications of his teaching. So he’s taught them something about God and themselves. Now he’s teaching them the implications. Notice verse 27. Like I said, the first hint of moral implication comes in that little word, should, should. God made all things this way. Why? “That they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he’s not actually far from each one of us, 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.'" That right there, folks, is the language of moral obligation, that they *should* seek God.

Paul has turned the corner from the facts of theology to the implications of theology. It's not enough just to know these truths. Its not enough just to ascent to them intellectually as true and valid facts. God's truth obligates us to live by that truth, to submit to the God who's revealed himself through his creation and providence, but also through his revealed word. Notice, first of all, Paul informs them of their responsibility to seek God. In light of who God is, in light of how he's ordered the universe, especially in light of how he has done everything for them to sustain them, they're faced with the moral obligation to seek him. It's not only our moral responsibility to worship God, but to worship him exclusively, to worship him only.

All idolatry is disallowed by verse 29, not just the pagan variety of the First Century, but also the seemingly sophisticated modern gods of today, right? Progress, development, science, global commerce, political power, military might, anything that we might honor or admire or trust in, anything that rivals God, that is the heart of idolatry. I don't

care if it's a democratic form of idolatry or a republican form of idolatry. I don't care if you're on the left side of the aisle or the right. You're all listening to the same talk radio, just different perspectives. And listen, it's idolatry, if you're trusting in that, if you're hoping in that more than God. If an election can ruin your peace, you might be committing idolatry.

Notice this, what has Paul pointed out here? What's just happened? If the Athenians, these Epicureans, Stoics, all the rest, if they're not worshiping the true God, and according to verse 27, they should, and if they have been worshiping idols, and according to verse 29, they ought not to do that, they ought not even to think that way; well what has Paul just done? He has exposed the fact that they are sinners. He has just drawn a bead on their guilt before a holy God. Based on the moral obligation they have to worship the God who created them, the one who sustains them, and has taken care of them, who has shown his love and grace toward them. He's just exposed the fact that they've sinned against him. They've offended him. That's the implication of the theology he just taught.

So having taught them about God, having unpacked the moral implications of his teaching, Paul presses them for a verdict.

He presses them to a decision. He exhorts them to repent. Look at verse 30. "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent." All of them are to repent because God has the right to wipe out mankind in his wrath for one little seeming peccadillo of a sin, like a white lie. Yeah, he can wipe us out for that. Even more so, for idolatry. Even more so for not showing gratitude.

In fact, not only does he have the right to do that, he's bound by his holy and righteous nature to judge all sin and every sin. Instead, though, for the Gentile nations, God has shown remarkable patience. He's continued to demonstrate mercy and kindness and common grace. He has continued to this very point to overlook and instead of wrath, he's given them food to eat. He's given them air to breathe. He's given them marriages to rejoice in. Babies to kiss. All the provision of God's goodness in creation and in providence. Man owes God his exclusive worship, his absolute allegiance, his love and devotion, his sincere and profound gratitude. But Romans 1:21, "The didn't honor him as God or give thanks to him." Hmm. He's been merciful to overlook past ignorance, "but now he commands all people everywhere to repent." Now. Why now? Because of Jesus Christ.

Look at that word repentance. He's calling everyone to repent. It's a very important part of the Gospel message. It's essential, we can even say, it's not the Gospel without calling people to repentance. John the Baptist preached repentance, Matthew 3:2, saying, "Repent, the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Jesus preached repentance. He came, very first words, Matthew 4:17, "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" Peter preached repentance on the day of Pentecost. Acts 2:28, he said, "Repent, and be baptized every single one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."

So what does repentance mean? The word, *repent*, is the word *metanoeo*. *Metanoeo*, literally, to change the mind. Mind, is the word *noe*. We're not talking about a flippant, superficial change of mind. I wanted chocolate ice cream, but I've changed my mind. I want vanilla, now. That's not really what we're talking about. We're talking about something much, much deeper. But even in that illustration of chocolate versus vanilla, what does the change of mind indicate? You don't buy chocolate and you buy vanilla, right? The change of mind affects your actions.

So repentance, in this sense, is what we might call a paradigm shift. It's a radical break with a former way of



thinking, to convert, to think entirely in an entirely different way. And this change of mind goes deep. It goes all the way down into the heart to decision-making central so that all life decisions are run through the grid of this new direction. Repentance is a radical change of affections. Forsaking all idolatry, like Paul said about the, fir, the Thessalonians. Forsaking all idolatry to worship and serve the living God.

That's why we understand biblically that faith and repentance are gifts of God. They flow out of divine regeneration by the Spirit of God. Like faith, repentance is not generated by a dead sinner, someone who's a corpse. It requires the quickening power of the Holy Spirit. And that's these Athenian philosophers. That's what they're facing. Having heard the truth, they're not allowed to stay the same. They're no longer ignorant; they're informed, and they must repent. They must abandon their man-centered philosophies and pursue an entirely new direction in their thought life, one of worship and gratitude to God. And you know what? That's going to change their out, external actions. It's going to change their associations. It's going to change what they say. It's going to change the things that they participate in, isn't it?

Two more things I'd like you to see in Paul's Gospel presentation here. Not only do we preach an accurate theology and draw out the implications, call people to repent, well we also need to tell people about judgment and mercy. Judgment and mercy. What we proclaim is weighty. And the message carries consequences based on whether a person rejects or accepts that message. There's inescapable wrath for those who refuse to repent and there's unassailable mercy for those who embrace repentance.

Look at verse 30 again. "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 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 us assurance, he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." God will judge the world in righteousness. That is to say, no favoritism, no exceptions, all will be weighed in the scales of his holy law and all will be found wanting. There are consequences in continuing toward judgment day without repentance. That's a warning.

But notice in the warning, following close on the heels of the warning there is promise. The man God appointed to judge the world? Well, he's the very man, same man that God raised from

the dead. Why is that significant? Well, in the mind of someone hearing this for the very first time, not in the mind of all of us who've kind of been accustomed of hearing this over and over, in the mind of brand-new hearers of this truth, it raises a significant question. Why did the man appointed to judge the world have to be raised from the dead? What killed him in the first place?

That takes us right back to the Gospel, doesn't it? 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For our sake God made him who, who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that we in him might become the righteousness of God." Brings us right to the Gospel. Paul had already been teaching the Gospel. It's what they heard earlier in the marketplace that brought him up to the Areopagus. So they'd been hearing him articulate this, but they'd muddled it. They'd confused it.

But look back at verse 30 for a second. You see how Paul has drawn a line in the sand of human history in that verse? He draws the line, "The time of ignorance God has overlooked, but," draw a line, "now he commands all people everywhere to repent." What changed? What, what did God overlook in the times of ignorant past, but now calling everyone to repentance? What's different now, that wasn't true then? The answer's right there

in verse 31. The crux of Paul's argument is this, "God has given assurance," or you could translate that word, proof. "God has given proof to mankind, to all mankind by raising Jesus from the dead." The resurrection is the indisputable fact of human history that proves everything written on these pages of Scripture.

Listen, the resurrection is a powerful, irrefutable argument for the truthfulness of Paul's Gospel. Now, in all we have seen, do you notice how Paul has not attempted for one moment on his own to prove anything to these pagans? Do you see his simply declared the truth of it and then called them to repentance? It's as if he expects, as we ought to, he expects that the declaration of the truth is enough.

Beloved, that's what we all need to do, as well. We just tell the truth that God revealed in his word. We trust that it has the power to convict and change the heart. We trust God by his Spirit to accomplish his sovereign will by means of our obedience to preach the message he's given us. Does that make sense? So what happened? Did the Athenian philosophers fall to their knees and repent before Paul? Was there a mass revival on Mars Hill? Did they turn from intellectual pride, pagan idolatry, put faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? Well,

for the most part, no they didn't. And that brings us to a final point in this short series, faithful evangelism requires proper motives, an acknowledgement of the impossibility of our task, which causes us to speak in a gracious manner, and to proclaim an accurate biblical message of Gospel truth. But final point, we need to set realistic expectations. We need to set realistic expectations.

When our message is clear and accurate, get this, the majority will reject our message. And yet, a few will embrace it. Here's the majority response, verses 32-33, "Now when they heard of the resurrection from the dead, some mocked. But others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' So Paul went out from their midst." Paul didn't plead with them. He didn't beg. He didn't chase after them. In fact, Paul seemed rather indifferent to their invitation for further discussion. Why?

Well, look, what else needed to be said? If they didn't repent at the clear teaching of the Gospel, why spend any more time with them? Their response, open hostility, patronizing indifference, that was proof-positive that their hearts were committed to their self-rule, committed to their rebellious independence. Further dialogue with them was not necessary. He wasn't being unkind. He was being wise. In the execution of his

apostleship, he was a steward of his time and energy. Those people had everything they needed to repent and turn to Christ and Paul needed to just keep moving.

Now, we're not the Apostle Paul, right? We're not called to apostleship to travel around the entire world and preach this kind of message. Sometimes our evangelism is going to take time. Sometimes it's going to take weeks, months, even years. That's the way with us whom God has planted in one place, at one time and not called us to go, but to stay and go into our community. I'm not saying that all evangelism has to be what we call relational evangelism, but relationships are good ideas. Get to know people and then take them through and teach them. After you've been teaching them, well then show them the implications. After you've shown them the implications, exhort them to repentance.

Sometimes that takes time. Sometimes it takes one conversation. You don't need to limit it. But Paul, he needed to keep moving. And he knew, and we should know, that if we get all of that out, we've said what needs to be said. It's not the skill with which we scatter seed, it's the power of the seed. Paul quietly went out of their midst. He had nothing more to

say. He simply trusted God to use the truth that he proclaimed to bring him to repentance.

Was that a good thing to trust? Well, some did believe, right? If they believed, well then it was sufficient, wasn't it? It was sufficient to save some. And this account, therefore, closes on a triumphant note. Verse 34, "Some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite," so there's one philosopher. "And a woman named Damaris and others with them." Now this Dionysius and Damaris, they must have been pretty well-known figures. So sometimes, I know 1 Corinthians chapter 1 says, "Not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble," but there are some. It doesn't say, none mighty, none noble, none wise. Here are some.

When we preach the Gospel accurately, clearly, boldly, God's elect will recognize the truth. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice and they come to me." Religion, philosophy, culture, history, none of that can hinder God's power to save his people from their sins. That's what we're doing in faithful evangelism. We herald an accurate Gospel, and God, who opens the hearts of those he's chosen, they embrace it by faith. They repent of their sins. They embrace Jesus Christ. That's what God has called us to do. So let's go do it. Amen!