

ATHENS, THE GREAT INTELLECTUAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL CITY (PART I): THE PREACHER'S URGENCY AND HIS AUDIENCE – WHO IT IS THAT NEEDS THE GOSPEL ACTS 17:16–21

Introduction

This is an excellent study on different types of people and audiences who sit before the gospel.

- I. The messenger Paul was in Athens, the great intellectual and cultural centre (v. 16).
- II. There were the religionists (v. 17).
- III. There were the God-fearing people (v. 17).
- IV. There were the average persons or citizens (v. 17).
- V. There were the Epicureans or pleasure-seekers (v. 18).
- VI. There were the Stoics or the self-disciplined (v. 18).
- VII. There were the philosophical questioners of Christ (vv. 18-21).

I. Acts 17:16 Paul, the Minister at Athens

There was the messenger Paul in Athens, the great intellectual and cultural centre of the world. Paul was alone, and no doubt he did as anyone would do — he toured the city. But note: he was not swept off his feet by the majestic buildings and splendour of the architecture. Contrariwise, what gripped him was the idolatry. Ancient writers estimate that the city had thousands and thousands of idols, one or more for every person in the city. The idols sat everywhere, lining the streets and buildings, within and without every home. Seeing such a sight distressed (paroxuneto) the spirit of Paul. The word means aroused, agitated, irritated. Paul was aroused...

- over the abuse of God's glory.
- over the spiritual blindness of man's mind and reason.
- against the devil's enslavement of lives.
- with compassion for the souls of men.

Note what happened: Paul could wait no longer. He had been waiting for Silas and Timothy, but he could not swallow the scene of idolatry anymore. He began to reason and discuss the gospel with men everywhere. The word reasoned (dielegeto) means to reason and discuss. And he proclaimed the gospel day by day. The idea is twofold.

1. He was zealous, full of fervour and passion, eagerly grasping every moment and opportunity.
2. He knew the stakes were high. The destiny of everyone he passed and saw lay in the balance. They were all lost and doomed unless he could reach them with the gospel. Therefore no matter the cost, he had to do all he could to reach and help them in their search for the truth.

ACTS 17:16–21 ATHENS

The once great city was now in its sunset of glory. Throughout ancient history Athens had been one of the most glorious cities of the world. Literature, art, architecture and thought flourished. Prosperity was rampant. But as history has always proven, when a people gain prosperity, most of them become arrogant and self-sufficient, extravagant and indulgent, greedy and unjust, worldly and immoral, slothful and complacent, selfish and hoarding. The spiritual fibre and physical hardness of the Athenians deteriorated. At the time of Paul's visit, the city was the greatest university centre of the world. But its citizenry lacked spiritual unity, common purpose and behaviour. There were as many gods as there were men. Men did little else than exercise their mental faculties, debating the merit of philosophies, reality and gods (v. 21). □

II. *Acts 17:17 Religionists, the First Audience*

The first audience for the gospel was the religionists. The religionists were pictured in the Jew's. They...

- were the regular attendees of worship services
- were familiar with God
- were familiar with the Scripture and its teachings
- were the ones usually trying to live moral and just lives
- were the ones usually seeking truth

Therefore, they were the logical ones to try and reach first. They were the first ones for whom the preacher's heart would ache, for they...

- had been seeking God and had been blinded by institutional religion, by its ceremony and ritual and form
- were resting in a false security and assurance
- had been holding the banner of morality and justice high in an evil world
- had been holding back the flood waters of evil

Very simply, the religionists were the persons who were more like the preacher than anyone else. The religionists, although lost and blinded to Christ, were concerned with morality and justice. The preacher's heart was bound to ache for the blind religionists to know the truth.

Rom 9:2-3 *I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race.*

Rom 10:1 *Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.*

1 Th 2:9 *Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.*

III. Acts 17:17 *The God-Fearing People*

The second audience for the gospel was God-fearing men and women. The words God fearing Greek (sebomenois) mean those who worship or the God-fearing men and women who are not Jews. There were many of these in the ancient world, many who were just sick of the immorality and injustices of their pagan society and polytheistic religions. Therefore, they turned to the Jewish religion, being attracted by the emphasis upon one God and the laws demanding morality and justice for all (see *Corrupt Society*, Acts 16:14; note, Acts 17:11).

Acts 17:27 *God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.*

Deu 4:29 *But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul.*

Isa 55:6 *Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near.*

Jer 29:13 *You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.*

IV. Acts 17:17 *The Average Citizen*

The third audience for the gospel was the average person or citizen of the community, the person of the marketplace. These were the people of the community who...

- gave little thought or notice to truth, to what lay behind the world and man, behind behaviour and death.
- just fit in and went along with the crowd and society and the world around them, whether just or unjust, moral or immoral.
- were concerned with day to day affairs and practical living.

They were the audience who moved about in the market places and shopping centres of the community, buying and selling, demonstrating concern over...

- appearance and looks
- possessions and things
- position and recognition
- social acceptance and popularity
- clothes and the latest styles
- body and development
- money and property

Note: these are the materialists of the world. Materialism always leaves the human heart empty and longing for something that will fill and satisfy one's life. The heart of the honest materialist is a prime audience for the gospel.

Mat 6:24 "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."

Mat 16:26 "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Rev 3:20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

Col 3:2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

Rev 22:17 The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.

Isa 1:18 "Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool."

Isa 55:1 "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost."

V. *Acts 17:18 The Epicureans, Worldliness*

The fourth audience for the gospel was the Epicureans or pleasure-seekers. The Epicurean philosophy has been in the world since Adam. However, the basic principles were spelled out by the Greek philosopher Epicurus (B.C. 342-270). The basic beliefs are:

- => The world happened by chance, by accident.
- => If there are gods, they are remote and disinterested in the affairs of men.
- => Man is left on his own to discover the truth and pleasure of life.
- => There is nothing after death, no heaven or hell, no reward or punishment. Man simply returns to become part of the dust of the earth.

Note how this philosophy centres upon man and his pleasure. It is both humanistic and materialistic, leaving God completely out of the picture. Note also the practical outcome of the Epicurean philosophy. Man is left on his own to discover the truth and his own pleasure. Whatever pleases him, gives him and his society pleasure and happiness, he is free to do. Such a low view of man leads man...

- to do his own thing
- to indulge self

- to eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow he dies and is no more
- to take license against others
- to please self over others
- to behave for self-interest, selfishly
- to ignore and deny the rights of others in order to have and build, and to secure one's own happiness and pleasure

Pleasure-seekers are often left empty and dissatisfied, craving for something to fill and satisfy their lives. They are, therefore, prime prospects for the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Luke 8:14 *“The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.”*

Luke 21:34 *“Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap.”*

1 Tim 5:6 *But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives.*

Titus 3:3 *At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.*

James 4:4 *You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.*

VI. Acts 17:18 The Stoics

The fifth audience for the gospel was the Stoics or the rationalists, the self-controlled and disciplined. The stoic philosophy was formulated by Zeno (B.C. 336-264). The basic beliefs are...

- Pantheism: god exists in everything and in everyone. The fiery spirit, the energy of everything and everyone, is god.
- Fatalism: whatever happened occurred because it was supposed to happen. There is no good or evil in the world. Things are the way they are and happen the way they do because they are destined. There is nothing anyone can do about anything.

Note the practical outcome of this philosophy. People — those who believe in a god and believe that whatever happens is of god and that events cannot be affected by man — slip into one of two responses.

First, some people try to control their destiny. They discipline and control themselves, using all the reasoning powers and energy at their disposal. They try to control their destiny and fate, attempting to make only good things happen. They even deny

themselves the simple pleasures and joys of life. They repress all feelings, for emotions and feelings are only signs of weakness. A person tries to be self-sufficient, indifferent to pain and pleasure, guided by reason alone.

Second, some people reason they can do nothing about their fate; therefore, they just live doing little if anything. They take whatever comes as their destiny and the life they are supposed to live. They make few, if any, significant contributions to life. Of course, this often leads to complacency and lethargy, laziness and worthlessness.

The disciplined, the self-controlled, and the legalist often ache for release, for a spirit of joy and rejoicing. And they, along with the lethargic, complacent and fatalist, often ache for the care and interest of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are often a prime audience for the gospel.

Gal 4:10-11 You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.

1 Tim 4:8 For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

VII. Acts 17:18–21 The Philosophers

The sixth audience of the gospel was the philosophers, the philosophical questioners of Christ. Note several points.

1. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers confronted Paul. Some mocked him to his face, calling him a “babbling” Others took him more seriously, saying that he was presenting new and foreign gods to the people.

Thought 1. Paul endured the mockery, stood his ground and refused to be dismissed. He wanted the chance to preach the gospel so that some might be saved. What a dynamic example for us — willing to bear mockery in order to try and reach some of the mockers for Christ!

2. It was Jesus and the resurrection that confounded the philosophers. Note: Paul was proclaiming Jesus as the personal God...
 - the God who is vitally interested in our lives, interested enough to come to earth and live and die for us.
 - the God who is so interested in us that He has ordained a day when He will resurrect all of us to face Him and give an account of our lives.
3. The philosophers brought Paul to the Areopagus, which is the Greek for Mars Hill. It is not known whether Paul was asked to share his god with a congregation of all the interested philosophers of the city or before the official court of the city. Whatever the case, he would be surrounded by a throng of people who had followed him to Mars Hill. Paul was anxious to preach Christ.
4. The great need of the philosophers is clearly stated by Scripture. They were...

- aimless
- meaningless
- empty
- without profitable purpose

They had searched every philosophy and thought belief and position in the known world at that time, and they had come short in finding the truth — the one true and living God. They had searched and ended up empty for so long that they found meaning in life only by listening to new and novel ideas. They were hopeless in discovering the one all-embracing Being of truth.

Rom 1:22 *Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools.*

1 Cor 1:19-21 *For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.*

1 Cor 2:6 *We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing.*

1 Cor 3:19-20 *For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"; and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile."*

Eph 4:14 *Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.*

Col 2:8 *See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.*

James 3:15 *Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. ■*