

## Session 5

May 23, 2021

### SHARE THE MESSAGE

#### Acts 17:16-18, 22-23, 30-31

Few cities of antiquity could compare with Athens. The external splendor of its artwork and architecture was matched by an internal splendor of rich culture and intellectual accomplishment. Not surprisingly, the allure of the city led to an elitism among its citizens. It was the gathering place for the intellectuals and philosophers, and the city's religious life was steeped in pagan worship of a multitude of gods. The city itself was even named after a pagan goddess!

It was in this intellectually rich but challenging environment that Paul gave one of his most famous sermons. Three key principles stand out.

**Share with boldness (vv. 16-18).** After being chased out of Thessalonica (and then Berea) for preaching the gospel, one might think that Paul would be a little more low-key in his next attempt to share the gospel. But that simply wasn't the case. While he waited in Athens for his companions (Timothy and Silas) to join him, Paul was particularly troubled by the paganism that surrounded him (v. 16). The word *troubled* has the connotation of *exasperation* or even *anger*. So upset was he at the spiritual darkness, that Paul sought out people every day to *reason with* (v. 17), whether religious leaders in the synagogue or passers-by in the marketplace. Apparently, there was no shortage of skeptics to debate him! Epicureans denied a supreme God and believed that none of the gods cared about the affairs of men. Stoics believed that God created everything; therefore, all matter is eternal, and God was essentially the force that animated it. In either case, he was met with skepticism and doubt, as he boldly proclaimed the gospel of Christ and the reality of the resurrection (v. 18). For reflection: *Some people seem more interested in winning an argument than winning souls. Where should believers draw the line between healthy debate and heated arguments?*

**Share by using bridges (vv. 22-23).** In my missions classes at the Baptist College, I emphasize the concept of *bridges and barriers*. *Bridges* are those general beliefs that we share with other religious people. For instance, we share several common ideas with Islam (the belief in one true God; a single written revelation; existence of heaven and hell; a belief in Jesus, etc). While Islam has it wrong, these common concepts act as *bridges*, allowing us to at least begin a gospel conversation. *Barriers*, on the other hand, are those concepts that *hinder* our gospel conversations (in the case of Islam, things like the true identity and deity of Christ). The object is to use the bridges first, thus opening the door to sharing the gospel and ultimately working through the barriers. And that's exactly what Paul did; he focused on what they all had in common. The *Areopagus* (v. 22; popularly known as Mars Hill) is a large stone outcropping upon which appeals were made to the Greek court. When nothing was going on, the intellectuals and philosophers used it as a meeting place. From there, Paul made use of the bridge of *worship*. The Athenians were zealous to worship many gods, but, as Paul pointed out, in their zeal to worship, they missed out on the one true God (v. 23). For reflection: *Is this not a common problem today? How many people make the act of worship more important than the object of worship?*

**Share using the Bible (vv. 30-31).** If faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word (see Rom. 10:17), then the proclamation of the word of God is the essential ingredient of evangelism. Notice how Paul highlighted what *God* said. *He* commands people to repent (v. 30). *He* will judge the world. *He* raised Christ from the dead (v. 31). None of these important truths came from Paul's opinion; rather, they came from *God's word*, reflecting *what God has said*. Certainly, our personal testimony is a powerful tool when sharing the gospel. But what is even more powerful is the word of God! For reflection: "*For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart*" (Heb. 4:12).