

“Speaking Effectively For Christ”

Text: Acts 17:1-34

Series: Book of Acts [#21]

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Introduction

Today we continue following Paul on his second journey. He set out from Antioch in Syria with Silas, taking an overland route to visit the churches founded on the first trip. On the way the team expanded with Timothy and Luke. After several attempts to break new ground, they answered God’s call to go to Europe.

A new church was born at Philippi where Paul cast out a demon from a slave girl, was arrested, beaten and thrown into jail, with the head jailer and his family then coming to faith in Christ. Because of the opposition from many in Philippi, Paul’s team left and headed west.

Let’s check our maps [back of Bibles; screen]. They headed west to Thessalonica. Thessalonica was the capital of Macedonia. It was a *free city*, i.e., they could generally govern their own affairs according to their own customs and did not pay tributes to Rome, although they could not escape the Roman tax system any better than anyone else. It was also an important point on the route from Italy to Asia.

Then on to Berea, which was off the main road and was neither as large nor as important as Thessalonica. From there to Athens by ship. Athens was still a cultural and educational center, although it never regained its wealth and magnificence after the Romans sacked it in 86 B.C.

In these events at Thessalonica, Berea and Athens we see once again that Paul was an effective communicator of the gospel. No one is exactly like Paul. God does not expect anyone to communicate exactly as Paul did. God does expect us—each of us, all of us—to communicate the gospel effectively.

Sometimes we may know what we want to say, and it is perfectly clear and logical to us, but to others it may be anything but clear and logical. They may get a message, but not the one we want them to get. An employer was trying to get his workers to have a sense of teamwork and to get involved in improving the operation. As part of that, each week he posed an idea and asked for their suggestions. One week he said, “When I come in each morning I like to see everyone started on the day’s work. Any suggestions?” One worker replied, “Wear squeaky shoes.” That, of course, was not exactly the point he was trying to make.

Let’s explore some universal, unchanging principles for speaking effectively for Christ which we see in Paul here in chapter 17. We’ll start with the message.

The Message.

There are two principles about our message to note here. The first is the source of the message, which must be God's word. God's word was the constant source for Paul's message about Christ. To the Jews at Thessalonica, Luke tells us,

“... for three Sabbaths [he] reasoned with them *from the Scriptures*, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.’” (2-3)

To the Jews at Berea, go to the middle of verse 10,

“... [he] went into the synagogue of the Jews. Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.”

And he spoke from Scripture not only to the Jews there, but also to the Greeks, as we see in verse 12.

Then when Paul reached Athens, verse 17 tells us, “... he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present.”

Why did Paul do this? He knew that the Scriptures indeed are *God's Word*. He later wrote,

“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

He knew God's word is powerful. He wrote in Romans 1:16, “... the [gospel is] the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Listen to this statement. “You [Christians] have in your keeping a document with enough dynamite in it to blow the whole of civilization to bits; to turn society upside down; to bring peace to this war-torn world. But you read it as if it were just good literature, and nothing else.” *Who said that?* Mahatma Gandhi.

Paul also knew that God's word is not only powerful, it is precise. Hebrews 4:12 tells us,

“...the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

Because Paul knew all of this is true, he relied on the Scriptures to be the source of his

message. This is an unchanging, universal truth. In order for us to speak effectively for Christ, the source of our message must be God's word. If the Bible is to be the source of our message, we must be familiar with it. As we are familiar with it and allow God to weave it into the fabric of our thinking, motives and all we say and do, our witness will be effective.

We know that speaking effectively for Christ does not mean everyone will accept our witness and Christ. Many rejected Paul's message, but it was effective in accomplishing God's purposes. Our witness will also be effective as its source is God's truth in the Bible.

The second principle about our message is that its theme is to be Jesus Christ. Look at Paul's theme. At Thessalonica, verse three tells us,

“ [he was] explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.’”

Then at Athens, verse 18 tells us,

“... he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.” And, dropping down to verse 30, he preached “... having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.”

Paul summarized the theme of his preaching in his first letter to the church at Corinth, “..we preach Christ crucified...” (1:23).

And so the theme of our message must be Jesus Christ. We can talk with our coworkers, neighbors and friends about all kinds of things and even move into *religion, beliefs, churches*. These things can have a place, but if they become the theme of our message they also will lead to a dead-ended argument.

Think about conversations you may have had with people who are in false cults. You can talk about the contrived mistranslations in their versions of the Bible, about good works, annihilation, future events and so many more things and go around in circles for years.

The theme of effective communication for Christ must be Christ Himself. Now let's move from the Message to the Motive of our message.

The Motive.

For this we turn our attention to Paul's time in Athens. Luke's frank statement of what motivated Paul here might surprise us, verse 16,

“Now while Paul was waiting for them [Silas and Timothy] at Athens, his spirit was being *provoked* within him as he was observing the city full of idols. So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and

the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present.”

First, Paul was provoked by the empty, deceptive religion that was evidenced throughout the city. There were temples, idols and altars everywhere! They tried to cover all the bases. He says in verse 17 that he even found an altar with the inscription “To An Unknown God.”

Pausanias the Traveler went around Greece about fifty years after Paul. He wrote six volumes on his travels there, and he wrote more on Athens than any other city. He described seeing temples, statues and altars everywhere. He saw people continually debating philosophy. He too found altars with inscriptions “To An Unknown God.”

Yes, the people of Athens were very, very religious. The tragedy of all this empty, deceptive religion *provoked* Paul. The basic idea of this word *provoke* is to stimulate, to urge on, to provoke. It was used in a negative sense of becoming irritated or angry, and also in a positive sense of urging or stimulating one forward toward a task or goal.

Paul looked at all of the temples and altars, the activity and schools of speculation, at all the empty and deceptive religion and philosophy and it provoked his spirit. I see him with a combination of grief and anger at these intricate systems which lead and kept people away from God. He did not sit back and wring wring his hands, but he leaped into action. He proclaimed Christ.

Edmonton may not have temples and idols to manmade gods on every street corner, but it is nonetheless filled with empty, deceptive, dead-end religion. Do we see it? If we do, does it provoke us not to sit back and shake our heads but, like Paul, to spring into action?

The second aspect of Paul’s motivation to proclaim Christ in Athens was being provoked by the empty, deceived people. He saw them “groping” (27) in the dark, not seeing God, empty and deceived in spite of all their searching among the many options. He saw them in their lost state. He could not close his heart to the agony of their condition. We see that same feeling and response in his words which open Romans 9,

“I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh...” (9:1-3)

Every day we see and rub shoulders with people who are deceived and empty. Yes, many of them don’t see it, or at least can’t pin point the source their discontent. But we can and should see them as Christ does. We should feel for them as Christ does— “[feeling] compassion for them, because they [are] distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 5:36).

Question: “Do we really see and feel for them as Christ does? Are we motivated by what we see as Paul was?”

Of course these two motives do not comprise all of what motivated Paul to proclaim Christ. For example, in 2 Corinthians 5:14 he wrote that “the love of Christ” controlled him—it held him together; it held him on the mission of sharing the gospel. But these two things motivated Paul to share the good news in Athens, and they should be motivating us to share the good news in Edmonton.

We have looked at the Message and Motive in “*Speaking Effectively for Christ*,” now we look at Paul’s method here.

The Method.

The first part of Paul’s method I want you to focus on is where to begin. And, narrowing it down a bit more, with whom to begin. Recall where Paul began in Thessalonica, verse 2,

“And according to Paul’s custom, he went to them [the Jews and in their synagogue], and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures.”

Then in Berea, verse 10, “... when they arrived [there], they went into the synagogue of the Jews.”

He started with those who shared his background and interests and moved out from there. While he was the *Apostle to the Gentiles*, he started with his own Jewish people.

The application for us is clear. Begin with family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, people around us here in Edmonton, and move out from there.

Then, what can we learn from Paul about the methods of actually sharing the gospel? At Thessalonica and Berea Paul began with the Old Testament Scriptures which the Jewish people knew. In Athens he began by noting that...

- they were “very religious” (22);
- that they even had altars to unknown Gods (23);
- that some of their own poets had written things that could point them to the one and only true God (28).

Paul began with familiar concepts, and from there then led people to the truth of the gospel.

We should follow his example. Start with the concepts and concerns of the person you are talking with. We also should understand the trends of our times. For example,

- One recent poll found that 72% of Canadians believe in a god of some kind.
- But Statistics Canada reports that only one-third of adult Canadians attend religious services at least once a month.
- We are also being told that a growing number of people see religion and god from their own point of view rather than from that of any organized religion. This includes the growing idea of god being an impersonal force rather than a personal being.

These are a few principles about where to begin in “*Speaking Effectively For Christ.*” Now, let’s think about how to proceed.

Notice four terms Luke uses to describe Paul’s process. In verse 2 and again in verse 17 he says Paul “reasoned.” This term means to think something through and then also to logically discuss or argue those thoughts.

Some people suggest that a logical or reasoned approach to presenting the gospel and doctrine is a relatively recent development of the modern, rationalistic period. Paul would laugh at that notion, and be joined by a chorus of the Old Testament prophets.

Paul knew that God’s truth is objective, authoritative and unchanging. He knew that God has given us the ability to reason, and that the Holy Spirit will guide people to see and understand the truth. So he *reasoned* with them.

The second term, in verse 3, is that Paul “explained” the evidence for Christ and the Scriptures. This interesting word speaks of opening something by dividing or separating, and to open thoroughly. It’s like coming into a room with the curtains closed and completely opening them, allowing the light to shine in. Paul explained and clarified the evidence for Christ and the Old Testament Scriptures about Him so these people could see it clearly.

We also find this word in Luke’s account of the thoughts of the two men to whom Jesus appeared on the road to Emmaus. They said to each other,

“Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was *explaining* the Scriptures ... [drawing back the curtain, giving light to the Scriptures]?” (Luke 24:32)

Then Luke used it again a few verses later when he described Jesus’ final teaching to the disciples, “... He *opened* [the same word] their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:44).

The third term is also in verse 3. Paul *gave evidence* that the Messiah had to die and be raised again. This word evidence originally meant to place something beside or before someone or something. For example, to place food on the table in front of you. It was then used in a logical and legal sense of placing something in front of you so as to prove or make the point or case.

And then the fourth word that describes how Paul proceeded to present the gospel, is in verse 4. He *persuaded* some of them. Paul worked, relying on the Holy Spirit, to persuade or convince people to believe.

Paul used a thoughtful, personal, reasoned approach to move people toward making a decision on the gospel, one way or another. Yes, the Holy Spirit does the convicting and saving work. Paul recognized his part in the process. He knew what it means to “*Speak Effectively For Christ.*”

Is this how we speak for Christ? Do we move people to make a decision in this way?

Conclusion.

Are we “*Speaking Effectively For Christ?*” Are we ready for the opportunities that will come to us? It is important to be prepared because we don’t always have the time to get ready when an opportunity rises.

Two men were walking through a field when they spotted a bull that didn’t look too friendly ... and the bull spotted them! They took off toward the closest fence, and the bull took up the chase. As the bull gained ground on them, one of the men shouted to the other, “Pray John! Pray!” John shouted back, “I can’t. I’ve never prayed in public.” “You’ve got to!” his friend shouted, “the bull is catching up to us!” “All right. I’ll say the only prayer I know, ‘O Lord, for what we are about to receive, make us truly thankful.’” It was a bit late to learn about prayer.

As you now reflect and respond to God,

- thank Him that He gives you the privilege of speaking for Him, and that He can make your witness effective.
- Then, put the state of your witness in the spotlight—
 - Are you preparing to speak for Christ?
 - Do you see those who don’t know Christ as He does, in their true present spiritual state?
 - Do you know and see their everlasting future if they die without coming to know God through Jesus Christ?
 - Are you motivated to speak?
 - Are you actually speaking for Christ?
- Finally, ask God to give you passion for those without Christ, to keep it burning, and to make your witness effective.

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