

MABC 5 November 2017  
Acts 17:10-34

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So we're continuing with our series on the book of Acts – the narrative that tells of the adventures of Jesus' followers in the years immediately after His death, resurrection and ascension. Acts gives us practical examples of living for Jesus, and how our faith can work out in our daily lives.

This passage we're up to today takes place towards the end of the Apostle Paul's second missionary journey, which took him to Thessalonica, which Steve talked about last week, where Paul and his entourage received a hostile and jealous response to their message, and end up escaping from the city under the cover of darkness.

So they move on to Berea, where they get a much warmer reception.

*10 As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. 11 Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. 12 As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.*

*13 But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. 14 The believers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. 15 Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.*

The Bereans are described as being of “noble character”, because they did what each one of us should do when we have our thinking challenged: They took it to the Word; they examined Scripture.

Paul's claims and ideas appeared to conflict with the Berean's thinking. The Berean believers showed their noble character by intelligently checking out what Paul had to say, under the spotlight of Scripture, which to them would be what we know as the OT.

As followers of Jesus, we have the same obligation: Any word of knowledge or insight, or prophecy, or even just thought challenging teaching: We need to shine the light of Scripture on it and see if it holds up.

And of course, to do this, we need to know our Bibles.

Scripture is our bottom line; our constitution. We're not adverse to people having words of knowledge, or revelations from God, but just because someone claims they're speaking on God's behalf, doesn't mean they are.

In fact, one of the big themes of the later NT, is addressing the problem of false teachers; People who claim to be speaking on behalf of God, but are really leading others up the garden path,

Of course, this isn't unique to NT times – there are plenty of false teachers around today, and they're better organised than ever, such as the cult groups that are a real blight on our society.

Our safeguard against deception, is to take it to the Word, and to know the Word well enough that we know when someone's twisting it.

So it seems that the Berean's approach was one of intelligent consideration. What they *didn't* do was to ridicule Paul. Because ridicule is not an intelligent or mature

response to those with different viewpoints. This cuts both ways, and gives us an insight into how we should deal with those who disagree with us:

The Jolls are part of the mission team that we as a church support. And Chris, talking about their approach to mission work in SE Asia, said that “No one ever became a Christian because they lost an argument” (although C.S Lewis did, because he lost an argument with JRR Tolkien, but that's an exception to the rule).

In general, we are unlikely to argue people into the Kingdom.

In the same way, it would be hardly likely for someone to become a Christian because their existing beliefs were ridiculed.

As followers of Jesus, if we would like others to respect what we believe, and engage with our worldview intelligently and respectfully, then that's how we need to treat those we are seeking to reach with the Gospel.

The atheist Richard Dawkins has encouraged his followers to “ridicule people of faith at every opportunity”. I find it disappointing that an Oxford Professor would stoop to such schoolyard behaviour. So neither should we stoop to such a response.

It seems that Paul's intelligent and mature conversations with the Bereans came to an abrupt end when the rowdy and argumentative Thessalonians came to town and stirred up the crowds against Paul and Co.

So Paul is once again run out of town, and moves on to Athens.

*16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. 18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. 19 Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” 21 (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)*

*22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.*

*24 “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. 27 God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 28 ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’[b] As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’[c]*

*29 “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the*

man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

**32** When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” **33** At that, Paul left the Council. **34** Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

So in Athens we find one of the definitive examples of Paul treating his audience with respect, by presenting the Gospel in a manner they can relate to. And Paul also gives us insight into one of the most effective missionary strategies.

As was his custom, Paul, in Athens, heads to the local Synagogue to present the case for Jesus being the Messiah. But the only people Paul is going to encounter there are Jews. Paul is adamant that his mission is to the Gentiles, or non-Jews as well, so he *also* takes his message to the street.

As well as presenting Christ within the walls of worship, he also presents Christ in the marketplace. Likewise for us today: Generally, the message of Christ shared in the church is going to be heard by those who have already embraced the faith.

It's the embodiment of the term “preaching to the choir”.

So the Gospel also needs to be presented in the marketplace. But when we do, we need to use the *language* of the marketplace, not the language of the church.

The language of the marketplace is ever changing, and we need to be aware of the most effective and relevant methodology to use.

It seems to me that the principles of Acts 17 tie up with those of Acts 2, where there was a convention happening in Jerusalem, with delegates from all over the known world. As the Spirit was poured out on the believers on the day of Pentecost, they spilled out into the streets, having been enabled to speak in languages they hadn't learned:

*“Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?... —we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”* (Acts 2:7-11)

So here in Acts 17, when Paul was in the Synagogue, he presented the gospel with a *Jewish* emphasis, appealing to *Jewish* thinking. But on the streets of Athens, a city known for its philosophers and thinkers, he tailors his message to them, but without compromising the core message: Paul speaks their language.

And very quickly he ends up in a discussion with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers – which must have been real fun, because these 2 philosophies are about as opposite as you can get.

The Epicureans were followers of Epicurus. Their main focus was the Pursuit of pleasure – a life free of “disturbance” - avoidance of displeasure at all cost.

The Stoics on the other hand, were followers of a philosopher known as Zeno of Citium. They advocated a quiet “Stoic” acceptance of the challenges of life.

So Paul's debate with the Epicureans and Stoics result in him getting an invitation to speak at the Areopagus. A modern equivalent of this would probably be a University – a place where people explore understanding and new ideas.

In the words of Luke, the author of Acts: *“All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas”*. Really does sound like a University to me...

So when Paul gets his opportunity to speak there, he doesn't talk the way he would in a synagogue; he also doesn't talk the way he would to an angry mob of Jews trying to get him strung up – which happened in other parts of his story. He talks to

the people in the Aereopogus in a manner that respects who they are and how they think.

Which is what Jesus does with each one of us: Jesus meets us where we're at, and through His influence in our lives, changes us into who He wants us to be.

Paul addresses the philosophers of the Aereopogus starting with their polytheistic – or multiple god – understanding, and uses facets of *that* thinking, such as the altar dedicated to an unknown god, to present to them the One True God, and Jesus His Messiah.

Looking at the history of Christian missions, generally the missionary endeavours that have been successful, are those that have sought to contextualise the message to the culture they are seeking to reach.

That's why Mark and Jo Penny, another of our missionary families, and Rob and Leanne Lovatt have committed so much of their lives as Bible translators; making sure that people have the Bible to read in their own language. This is a modern continuation of Acts Ch2, and Acts ch17.

One of the most celebrated examples of this was Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission, in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> C.

Previous mission initiatives in China had been largely unsuccessful, as missionary practice was quite imperialistic. The Gospel was tied to the culture of the missionaries, and so to embrace the Gospel seemed to be synonymous with embracing the culture of those bringing it.

In contrast to this, Hudson Taylor adopted the practice of wearing native Chinese clothing, and living as a local. This caused consternation with his English supporters, but his efforts started to bear fruit. So much so that Hudson Taylor has been described as one of the most significant Europeans to visit China in the 19th century. The important thing was that although Hudson Taylor embraced Chinese culture, he didn't compromise his core values, and as such he was a significant influence in opposition to the opium trade.

Similarly with William Carey, who as a missionary to India, embraced the culture, but drew the line at the cultural practice of Sati, or bride burning. In Indian culture, when a man – usually aristocratic - died, his body was burned on a funeral pyre, and his wife was burned alive with him. Carey was a key figure in the campaign to stamp out Sati.

Embracing the culture, without compromising values.

A more local example is that of Samuel Marsden. Marsden was the Anglican Bishop of Sydney, where he was also the local magistrate, which earned him the nickname of “the flogging bishop”.

In 1814 he travelled to NZ, and on Christmas day at Rangihoua, 203 years ago, he preached the very first Gospel message in our nation, celebrated in the Christmas Carol: Te Harenuī.

However, the first missionary endeavours were largely unsuccessful. What wasn't helpful, was that one of the missionaries – Thomas Kendall – had an affair with one of his Maori school pupils. Kendall tried to justify it by claiming it was "in order to obtain accurate information as to their religious opinions and tenets, which he would in no other way have obtained". There's a Tui Beer billboard right there. Yeah, right. But the main reason the first mission initiatives to Maori were less than successful, was that the missionaries believed that they needed to civilise Maori, before they could understand the Gospel. This of course, meant turning Maori into Englishmen. Which the Maori didn't want!

A far more effective mission initiative was lead later by Henry Williams, and his brother William Williams, where they sought to present the gospel in a Maori context, but without compromising their core principles.

Recognising that Jesus is not an Englishman. Or an American. Or whatever culture is seeking to present Him to another culture.

In the grand scheme of things, especially from our globalised, cosmopolitan viewpoint, things like adopting the local dress customs seems relatively superficial. No one seems to bat an eyelid when Chris Joll shows up here, wearing typically Southern Thailand garb, and sporting a great big bushy Muslim-y beard.

But the principle of this that applies to all of us is that we hold the *pseudo* sacred lightly, so that the *truly* sacred might shine through.

The things that are part of our western Christian culture need to be held lightly, so that the core truths of the Gospel are not impeded.

As a Baptist church, we are the descendants of the Protestant reformation, the event that started in the 16<sup>th</sup> C, where there was a movement back to centring beliefs on Scripture.

One of the core principles of reformed Christianity is *Sola Scriptura* – Latin for Scripture alone – the theological doctrine which holds that the Christian Scriptures are the sole infallible rule of faith and practice.

Over the years that I've spent in and around church life, I've noticed that many of the conflicts or division amongst believers, are about the way we do things, rather than about deep theological differences.

Things like how we dress, what music we sing to, what language and terminology we use.

In our faith practice, we walk a thin line between contextualisation and syncretism: The Gospel in the context of the culture we are seeking to present it to, without becoming so syncretised with that culture that the Gospel loses its distinctiveness: Embracing the culture, without compromising values.

As you are probably aware, I am a musician. Music is very important to me, and I have very strong preferences concerning music I like, and music I don't like.

But Church isn't a place where I need to have my preferences featured. The music that I think we should use in Church, is whatever music best suits God's purposes in this time and place: the music that resonates with those we are seeking to reach, even if it's music I don't like.

Likewise with forms of dress. I like the fact that in *our* church tradition, pastors dress pretty much like everyone else, rather than wearing cassocks or robes. Conforming to the context we are seeking to present the gospel to.

When I was a child, the expectation was that you wore your best clothes to church. Men wore suits. Women wore dresses – (hemlines well below the knee of course!).

I remember when my Dad became the Sunday School superintendent at our church, he *stopped* wearing a suit to church, because he felt that it made it easier for the children to relate to him. He was letting go of the pseudo sacred, so that the truly sacred might shine through.

In the early church there was no shortage of controversy, so the Church Fathers developed creeds for the people to recite (because many of them couldn't read). These creeds outlined the core beliefs of Christianity.

In summary: God did the creating, Jesus is God in human form, Christ died and rose from the dead to pay for our sins, and then ascended to heaven. Christ lives in us through the Holy Spirit, and will return to judge.

That's the basic Gospel message, and everything we do in this place has that message at the heart of it. The packaging; the wrapper around how we present that message changes all the time, as it must if the Gospel is to be relevant. But the core message stays the same: As it must, if the Gospel is the Truth (with a capital T).

It's not uncommon for people to resist change. I understand this. I get frustrated by the pace of change – that my smart phone is obsolete within a year. That places that were once familiar, have the road layout changed so I get lost trying to find them.

That songs in church that were once fresh and familiar to me, are now considered out of date. But the reality is, this world is changing faster than ever. And if the Gospel is to stay relevant, we too must change with it – embracing the culture, but without compromising our values; letting go of the pseudo sacred, so that the truly sacred might shine through.

Chuck Colson, was a special counsel to President Nixon and Watergate conspirator who became a Christian, and founded Prison Fellowship International. He said: "During the Reformation, the reformers had a phrase for this spirit. It was called *semper reformandi*, or always reforming. The more we continue to understand that we have not arrived, and the more willing we are to adopt the humble approach that we and our churches are in need of continual reformation, the more our churches and lives will come to reflect the God we preach."

We're undergoing a building project - the purpose of this is to adapt our facilities to better serve God's purposes in this time and place. A few years ago, a very dear member of our Church family (who's now gone to be with the Lord) said to me: A lot of people worked hard to raise money for this building in the 1940's – it was fine then, why isn't it fine now?

Because the way we do things has changed, to present the Gospel to a changing culture. This is not to dismiss the importance of what happened back then – we have enjoyed this building for many years – I was married in it, both my children were dedicated in it. But the building project is another symbol of reformation – continually seeking to speak in a way that those we are seeking to reach can relate to. We are not curators of a museum, rather we are guardians of a life giving message.

This isn't always comfortable for us. Many of us want things to remain the way we like them. But a life that is lived in submission to God is continually reforming, just as a Church that has Jesus at the head of it is always reforming, so we can draw closer to God.

Part of the reason for this, is that we, as Christ's representatives on planet earth may present Him as clearly as possible to those who need Him, but don't yet know Him.

Are we willing to do that? Are we willing to lay our own preferences aside so that the Gospel may be seen as relevant to this world that needs the influence of Jesus now more than ever?