

So St. Paul has a stopover in Athens. And Paul is a try-hard, he's always closing, always work work working. And so while he's there he heads over to the synagogue to try and convert some folks to Christianity. Paul wasn't your usual mainline Protestant, he didn't live and let live, he got in people's faces and told them to repent. A lot of the stuff we hate about Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, that's St. Paul stuff. We tend to just name cities and streets after him, or if we're feeling really Catholic we'll have a feast day on his conversion. But St. Paul was a disturber of the peace, a Gandalf - if you're familiar with Tolkien. So Paul goes out to see how people are living in Athens. And he needs an air sickness bag because it disgusts him. The text says that 'his spirit is provoked' by their idols. He is triggered.

And I love Luke's description of Athens, he says people in Athens "spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new". That's the way you would say 'they sat on Twitter all day' they did nothing but watch Fox and CNN and MSNBC all day long. The more that changes the more that stays the same. They don't work or fight, they just talk and talk and talk. But Paul is going to use this to his advantage as a missionary.

Now the two parties of philosophers back then were the Epicureans and the Stoics. The Epicureans said the meaning of life was happiness and the way you got happiness was by enjoying good things in good company. Over time their views devolved into 'eat, drink, and be merry'. Women, wine, and song. Epicureanism is kinda like the Rolling Stones, always been around and never seems to die out.

On the other hand you had the Stoics whose views only really exist in military culture these days. They said that everyone had a duty to carry out, a job to do and that the way to happiness was by serving well, doing the right thing, and not getting emotional about it. Just do what you're supposed to do. Make your bed, do your job, raise your family, pay your taxes. Be good and you'll feel good. Jordan Peterson types.

So in his tour of Athens amongst the idols of the gods and goddesses Paul finds the inscription to an unknown god. It's the theological way of praying 'to Whom it may concern'. And Paul has the hook he needs. This is it - he thinks - I KNOW to whom it may concern. He knocked me off my horse and told me his name was Jesus.

And so Paul starts preaching on the street - if you saw Paul today you'd probably say man he's a crazy person. But Paul begins with common ground. He cites their poets and writers and says that they got a few things right and he builds from there.

Paul says they know that there is a divine, there is a God, and that he made the world and everything in it. At this point the epicureans and Stoics would even be on board. Then he points out that idolatry is irrational. The God who made the universe cannot be trapped in stone or wood, things shaped by human hands. Or even in a building. Paul clearly didn't go to Seminary cause he would've got in trouble for saying this.

Then he cites their own poets to prove that we are God's offspring, his children - that "we are made in the image and likeness of God". This would've been a challenge to his hearers because the Greeks were quite racist and viewed people like slaves in a much lower light but here Paul is making no distinction. That's a part of the teaching of Christianity that we all came from Adam. We are all family.

Paul then says God has overlooked their ignorance but now He calls them to repent, to change their mind, because God has set a day of judgment and that he will judge the world by one man in righteousness and that he has proven this one man to be the appointed one because God raised him from the dead. We know this man is Jesus but Paul doesn't even name him in Luke's record of the sermon.

And how did Paul do amongst the Pagans? What were the results? People insulted him and misunderstood him. But a couple of them believed. A few repented of their sins and trusted in Jesus and they are named. Dionysius and Damaris. Just like their names were recorded in the book of life so they are named here.

And so looking at Paul's missionary work in Athens, what can we learn as Christians today?

What has changed?

1. People are still looking for happiness - the Bible gives an answer to this in the joy of the Lord, for those who believe in Jesus.
2. People are still struggling with identity politics, race, gender, and the like - the Bible gives an answer to this in saying that God created us from Adam and Eve, male and female in his own image and likeness.
3. People are still ignorant about spiritual realities. -the Bible will show them the reality of God and the work of the Holy Spirit in whom we live and move and have our being.
4. The call to repent must still go out - At my evangelism and outreach conference last weekend I got to meet some people from the Toronto area who were evangelized for the first time in the past year. One kid named Ryan in his 20s had never been baptized, gone to church, or heard the gospel. And some folks from a church group went to his college and were sharing the gospel. On this campus there were marxists out, jehovahs witnesses out, lots of groups spreading their literature and ideas, but there were also some Christians out that day, and by their sharing of the Gospel the Holy Spirit turned Ryan's heart and he repented, believed, and was baptized. Just like

Dionysius and Damaris. - **Talking to strangers about Jesus still works** even if we find it scary and don't want to do it.

You might be incredulous and say Pastor that would never work here, and so I went out this week into our community and found the same kind of touchstones Paul found in his 'to whom it may concern' inscription'.

I drove down with my dog 9 minutes towards the lake, and I parked next to a farmers field because - as you know - there is NO parking on Lake Erie anymore - and as I walked down the sidewalk you know what I saw more than anything else. TWO words again and again and again. What were they? NO TRESPASSING. violaters WILL be prosecuted. Every imaginable threat of the law against me in case I just thought about touching my unclean toe on their grass. And if I resolved to witness to these people what might I say? To the man with 18 no trespassing signs on his lawn. "Sir, I see you are passionate about trespassing, might I tell you about the Creator God who owns this land more rightfully than you do, and about what he says about trespassing?"

I drove to Hagersville and saw orange signs that say what? Every child matters. If I were to speak to someone there, I would say I absolutely agree - in fact God's word says that every child is loved by God, Jesus says to such belongs the kingdom of God - have you been baptized into this kingdom? Have you entered into faith like a little child?

Dearly beloved there are all sorts of ways that we can talk to people about our faith, the simple truth is we're usually just too scared or embarrassed to do so. And it's something we ought to pray about. I should care about people like Ryan enough, to talk to them about Jesus, but I'd rather look normal. And at the end of my life, I don't think that in the presence of Jesus I will be able to tell him with a straight face it was too hard to talk about my faith. Am I going to tell the Lord Jesus who bled and died for the church 'sorry it was too hard to invite strangers to church.' Am I going to go through eternity not making eye contact with St. Paul because I didn't have the courage to live my faith, or even financially support missionary work?

I gotta tell you a story friends. People often tell me, well we have pastors to do evangelism. I remember my evangelism class in Simcoe, under Pastor Dan Abraham - a great evangelist - and he sent us out to hand out flyers in the neighbourhood inviting people to St. Peters. And I remember going out and finding a pile of flyers in the trash at a nearby spot, and I first thought - oh everyone is throwing out their flyers. And then I looked and they were in a stack. One of the seminary students had just thrown out his whole pile and was sitting on the park bench playing on his phone. We don't have a lot of St. Pauls out there in Seminary these days friends. We can't outsource the living of our faith to a clerical class. On this mother's day we should remember that some of the best evangelists named in Acts were laywomen. Lois, Eunice, Priscilla, Lydia. It won't do to leave it to pastors, cause they'll mess it up. Have you seen some of these guys?

5. And the final point, the final reason Paul went out and shared the gospel, and why we too should is because the resurrection of Jesus is still the greatest news in history. The fact that Christ has taken away our sins, given us a loving relationship with God our Father, and will raise us to new life on the last day in a resurrected, imperishable body. That's GREAT news. That's the hope of every believer.

Telemarketers call people promising to save them 15% a month on car insurance and they think that's good enough news to bother folks at dinner about. Saving 20\$ a month or so. What are we sharing with people? All your sins forgiven, all your diseases cured, ETERNAL LIFE and HAPPINESS. We have good news to share, dearly beloved.

And because it's mother's day I'll tell this story. I remember being a teenager in Fonthill and one day the phone rang, and I think I thought it was my grandmother - it was someone's faithful mother. And she said Hello and explained that she wasn't selling anything. She said that she was now a shutin, but she had a phonebook in her house, and that every day she called the next number in it and that I was the person chosen today. She just wanted to tell me a story. I was very intrigued and had nothing to do as a teenager so I said that was fine. She told me the story of how her son had been a pilot up north and had flown in to a remote place, but had suffered plane trouble and lost his arm in a terrible accident. You could tell this was a family story from the way she was telling it. And she said 'and laying next to his plane without his arm he cried out to God in prayer to rescue him' and miraculously someone came along in that remote place, who was able to rescue him and get him to the hospital. And she said that's how she knew that there was a God, and asked if I knew Jesus. I must confess I was in tears by the end of her story and said yes, and to my amazement she said 'you do know Jesus, and you believe in him' 'Yes' 'well thank God, have a nice day' And she hung up. No sell, no charity, not even a church she wanted me to go to. My last name is Cottrill and so I think of all the people in Fonthill before C in the alphabet that that woman shared the good news with and I am in awe.

I'm not a great theologian, but I can tell you that that woman is going to get a better seat than me in Heaven, I can tell you that much. All she had was a telephone and she became a missionary.

### **Conclusion:**

I tell you all of this not to shoe-horn you into a programme or to make you feel guilty, but to show you that the missionary work of the church exists in so many ways and places. That God has called each of us to our station - as I preached last week- and that God uses each of us in his own way to share his love with the world.

Sometimes in life it feels like a stopover in Athens, but what we say and do by the power and working of God's Spirit in that moment, might make a world of difference to someone else.

May we be compelled by the good news of Christ's forgiveness and resurrection, to be good stewards of the message of the cross. May we be recipients and sharers of the saving gospel, and may our lives exude the joy of Christ. This way pray, in the name of Jesus: Amen.