
Engaging Culture with the Gospel

DAVE BAST

Are you ever bothered by the idolatry of our culture; the consumerism; the obsession with power and money; the celebrity worship; the addiction to entertainment and pleasure? Are you troubled by the sins of our culture; the divisiveness; meanness; the intolerance; the hatred of the other? Are you bothered by what seems to be the anti Christian bias of so many of the powerful and important people in our society? But how can we engage people like them with the Gospel? How might we witness to those who are doing things we find offensive, or who believe in things we think are idolatrous? Well, today on *Groundwork*, we will look at how the Apostle Paul did just that. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, today we have come to the fifth in a six-part series for the season of Epiphany, the season of light in the Church year, when we think of the Light of Christ and the Light of the Gospel going out into the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; mostly, we have been in Acts, although the first program...we started in the Gospel of Matthew, where we looked at early hints in the New Testament that the Gospel was going to go way beyond Israel, way beyond Judaism. We saw that in the family tree of Jesus in Matthew 1; and then the first visitors to Jesus—these strange Magi from the Far East. That was the early hint that the Gospel was going to get rolling beyond Jerusalem and Judea. Yes, we have been in Acts ever since watching how initially the Church sort of stayed in Jerusalem, but then persecution forced them to flee, but that was a good thing by the Holy Spirit's providence because it moved them out into Judea and Samaria; and then we saw they went even farther and farther out. So, we have been just sort of tracing the course of the Gospel, particularly as it entered into the gentile...the non-Jewish world; and in fact, in the previous program we looked at that landmark, Jerusalem Council, where the apostles literally put their heads together to figure out what is God up to that he is letting people become Christians before they even become Jews?

DAVE BAST

Right; so today we are going to look at a very interesting story; I think one of the most significant stories in the book of Acts from the standpoint of sharing the Gospel with people, because in the story that we see today, we will watch Paul reach out, literally, to what one theologian called Christianity's culture despisers; and Scott, you know and I know, too, as pastors we are usually talking to religious people. You know, we are usually preaching to the choir—to the already convinced...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes.

DAVE BAST

And it is really hard to try to engage someone who is maybe hostile to the Christian faith with the story of Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is what we find Paul doing in Acts Chapter 17, which is going to be our focus for this program. Paul has landed in the cosmopolitan city of Athens, Greece; the capital of all things cultural in the ancient world, as we will see in this program, the capital of philosophy and deep thought and spirited debate; and so, Paul lands there, and of course, you know, everywhere he goes he is a missionary. He was sort of the Johnny Appleseed of the early Church. He arrives in Athens, and let's hear some of these words from Acts 17, beginning at verse 16.

DAVE BAST

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens... So, we are picking it up in the middle of what is called Paul's second missionary journey...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And he has gone on ahead. He has left Timothy and his other companions back up the road apiece, so... ¹⁶ While he 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 babbling 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.

SCOTT HOEZEE

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 Because, you see, all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.

DAVE BAST

So, here he is. Paul has reached this great cosmopolitan city, as you said, Scott; the intellectual and cultural and artistic center of the ancient world, and especially, the home to the great schools of the philosophers, like the Epicureans and the Stoics. So, there was a lot of diversity of opinion here, and Paul... I find it interesting that he started in Athens the same way he started everywhere. He went to the synagogue first.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, you start at the heart of your own people, the Jewish people who had been waiting for the Messiah; that seems so foreign to us now, but back in these earliest days, even Paul, the great apostle to the gentiles, would start at the synagogue... start with people he knew, his fellow Jews and other God-fearing Greeks, as we are told; and word of what he is talking about spreads because nothing was as exciting to the Athenians than a new idea.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now, this is what got their tongues wagging. Paul is going to go way beyond an idea. Jesus is not an idea...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They were kind of content to leave everything at the level of theory. Paul is going to eventually bring it down to the level of reality; but, they want to talk to him, but first we notice that Paul looks around, and he is kind of sick to his stomach...

DAVE BAST

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

To see all these idols. It is such a pagan culture that it almost sickens him.

DAVE BAST

You know, I have been to Athens briefly, and I went to visit the ruins of the Parthenon, and you stand there in awe and wonder at this ancient building; you know, the most perfectly proportioned building in all of world history; and even as a ruin it is impressive; but Paul did not go as a tourist, you know...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

He did not go as kind of an art critic to admire the paintings and the sculptures. He went, as he went everywhere, as someone passionately committed to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and to the worship of Israel's God, and idolatry really bothered him. It really got to him. As he would say in his letter to the Romans, that people's minds have become darkened because they rejected the worship of the Creator and instead have turned to worship creatures; and in Athens, probably the greatest creature they worshipped was human beings themselves. They worshipped humankind. Greek art idolized the human form—the perfect human form. So, this was distressing—this was disturbing—to Paul, and you might think he would lash out against all of this idol worship.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, but he really doesn't. So, instead he just starts to talk about the Gospel, and as we will see in the next segment, he talks about it in a very contextual way. He is paying attention to his context. He knows the buzz words that will get their attention, and that might create an opening for the Gospel; so he is talking about Jesus, he is talking about the resurrection; it is a new idea, so the people love that love of wisdom, but it is a very Greek setting, where there were a lot of different ideas, particularly...and this is going to be important in this story...particularly when it comes to materiality—to the material world—to our physical bodies...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Are they really important? A lot of Greeks tried to transcend the body. The body is not important; the spirit is important—the soul is important; but Paul is also talking about this thing called resurrection.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what is that all about?

DAVE BAST

That got their attention, but they did not get it. I think it is also really significant... We sort of pointed to this already, but Paul turns away from the synagogue and what would have been a sympathetic audience in some respects. Even the God-fearing gentiles who attended the synagogue were attracted to the God of Israel—the idea of one great God; but he turns from there and really, literally goes into the marketplace, the *agora*, as it was called in ancient Greek cities, and he goes to this place called Mars Hill, or the Areopagus, and he begins to speak to the philosophers there. So, he is now addressing a very unsympathetic audience, and he is talking about Jesus and the resurrection: *Iesous kai anastasis* in Greek; and they misunderstand him. They think he is talking about...babbling about foreign gods...he must be talking about these two gods, but he is not, and he will engage them more deeply as we continue this story.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And, Dave, we have just seen that Paul, in the great Greek city of Athens, has moved from the synagogue to Mars Hill—the Areopagus—the number one philosophical debating site. This was where you went to share ideas, to argue. Their favorite sport was arguing ideas; so he goes there and he is going to talk to them now about the message he has come to deliver about the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

Right; and he begins with what we might call in communications terms, a hook; something to grab their attention, something to identify them with; and as he has been looking around at all of these altars that have been erected throughout the center of the city and the marketplace, to all the gods of the empire, you know...they do not want to miss any...Paul finds a very interesting inscription. So, this is what we read: 17:22 Paul stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, “People of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious, 23for 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...”

SCOTT HOEZEE

This is very interesting because we know Paul was upset, right? We read that in the previous segment of this program. He was almost sick to his stomach to see all this idolatry, but he does not begin by saying: You fools! You, you, you ignorant people! How can...? No, he is very gentle, and instead begins by complimenting them: Hey, you’re religious. You even seem to know there is a God worth worshipping that you cannot even name.

DAVE BAST

Right; and so he says: You know, I would like to talk to you about this God that you sense is out there, but that you are afraid maybe you have missed. He is really addressing their feelings of insecurity; perhaps, we could put it that way; they were worried that in all of their religiosity, in all of their various philosophies and different ideas, maybe they were still missing something...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

Maybe there was some truth out there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You could put a positive spin...and Paul will; Paul is going to put a positive spin on this and say: The unknown God, you know, that is the God and Father of Jesus Christ. In all likelihood, the Athenians were just sort of hedging their bets, you know: Just in case we missed somebody...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We will just leave this blank one. Fill in the blank god; so that was probably not a cynical move on their part, but just sort of, you know, hedging their bets a little bit; but Paul is going to use that as an opening, and he is going to exploit that opening because he goes on to say this, beginning at Acts 17:24 now, referring to this unknown God...that is who 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 he does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵He is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything; rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else; ²⁶from 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; ²⁷God 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; ²⁸for in him we live and move and have our being, as some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’”

DAVE BAST

²⁹Therefore, 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. ³⁰In the past, God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹for 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.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

So again, Paul is being very culturally intelligent here, pastorally sensitive. He is not calling names; he is not wagging a bony finger in their faces. He is just saying: I know the real God, and here is who he is. You know, he packs a lot into this sermon.

DAVE BAST

He really does...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is kind of a sermon...

DAVE BAST

It is a sermon, and that is the heart of his approach—of his address; but he spends most of his time trying first to identify with his audience, and say: You know, I am coming at this from the same direction you are; and very skillfully, I think, speaking to what was good in their idea—in their philosophy. So, he quotes with approval: God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being. That is a quote from an ancient...that is not from the Bible...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

That is from a Greek philosopher, and that is a verse that we often quote ourselves, even in prayer: God, you are the one in whom we live and move and have our being; and then the idea, we are his offspring; Paul quotes that with approval; and sometimes Christians will say: Yes, well, we are children of God. You have to be a believer in Jesus to really be a child of God by adoption through the Spirit, and that is true—that is very true—but there is also a broader sense in which every human being is a child of the same Creator. We are God's offspring; God is the Creator of all; and so we can identify with one another even across divides of religion or philosophy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And here, as Paul goes on to talk about the one true God that he believes in, the God who ultimately, Paul will proclaim, raised Jesus from the dead...but he kind of...as you look over his sermon it almost reads like the Apostles' Creed; you know, if you think of the great creed of the Church, we begin by...you know, that God is the Creator of heaven and earth, that he is the Lord...that Jesus is Lord...he is our Father and he will come again to judge the living and the dead...Paul has all of that in here: The creation of all things...God is the Creator...he is our origin; he is the Lord of all...he is still sustaining everything in his providence...he is the one who is in charge of the universe; he is our Father...here is who we came from, but he also will be our judge...he will come to judge the living and the dead, to look at what happened in this creation, what went wrong and how God can set it to right.

DAVE BAST

You also see here that when Paul does get around to kind of critique their thinking, he does it in the context of what he has just said about God. It does not really make sense to create images of this God, because he made us, we cannot make him. It does not make sense to think that we can feed him with our sacrifices, or that we can build houses for him to live in because he has given us our food, he sustains our lives; so, it is this idea of who is the boss and who is higher and who is lower, and that is his critique of their idolatry.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And probably...as he toured the city, he probably saw some altars where people were leaving fruits and vegetables for the god...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They were feeding their god, so he no doubt saw that also in Athens; but he is turning the tables and saying: No, no, no; God is the one who feeds us. He made us, he sustains us, he feeds us, he is our Father, and he is the judge; and the proof of this God being the real God is that the one he sent to this world to reveal himself, he raised him from the dead; and that is where the people will kind of stop listening; and then the implication of all of that is what we will consider next as we close out this program.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are looking at the story of Paul in Athens, and his great speech to the philosophers on the Areopagus—on Mars Hill—where he goes as far as he really can in identifying with them, in speaking to their felt needs of reaching out to the unknown God. He affirms some of the things that have been revealed through what we call common grace...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Or general revelation; to them truths about the Fatherhood of God and the Creator God; and the desire of God to be known—to be found—by all people everywhere. So, this hunger for God that they had, that is a good thing; but there comes a point where Paul has to speak the truth, and as carefully and as lovingly as he can, he points out the error of their idolatry, and he talks about Jesus and the resurrection.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And here is Acts 17, at the 32nd verse—verse 32: When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered and others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.”³³ At that, Paul left the council;³⁴ and 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, some believed. This was not a failure; this was a tough crowd—it is a tough crowd; but he got through to some, but for many of them, the resurrection of the dead made them sneer and snicker and laugh. Some said: We would like to hear more about it; but most just said... Well, game over.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that let's us out.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because, as we know, the Greeks looked forward to death as a release from what people like Socrates called the prison-house of the body; the body is the prison—the jail—in which our soul is ensconced for now. When we die, our soul flies free. That is why when Socrates died, he did so very, very gladly, because now his spirit would become one with all other spirits. The idea that you would ever want your spirit to come back and get back into a body was ridiculous to the Greeks...that was repugnant to them. That is the last thing you would ever want, and Paul is holding it out as the best hope?! They could not go there.

DAVE BAST

It is kind of ironic in a way, because the Greeks idolized physical beauty; but, as you said, Scott, they despised the physical ultimately in favor of the spiritual. It is interesting, Luke mentions the Epicureans and the Stoics; they would take different paths sometimes over their attitude toward life and the world. Sometimes the Epicureans were known for saying the body is of so little account, you might as well indulge it; just do whatever you feel like doing; whereas, the Stoics kind of were the opposite and said, no, you know, the soul is so important it needs to subdue the body, so we have to be really tough and really put ourselves through it; and Paul says: No, actually, you are both wrong. The body was made by God, too, and it has a future; and the proof of everything that God has promised to the world in Jesus is the fact that Jesus rose from the dead—literally and physically.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and that turned off some, as we said, but not all; and we had a couple of people...Dionysius and Damaris, a man and a woman, who were among those...

DAVE BAST

Right...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Who Paul got through to...

DAVE BAST

There were believers in Athens, yes. It was not a total failure.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right; and so Paul preached the truth, and by the Spirit's grace, it definitely got through to people; but as we kind of think about...as we wrap up this program, Dave, in this series where we have been pondering

the mission of the Church, during Epiphany as the Light of Christ spreads throughout the world, I think Paul's example here gives us some good reminders for our own cultural moment—for this time and place—where we now are called also to witness to the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

I really do believe that same thing, Scott, and I think the first thing Paul can show us is the importance of politeness...just simple politeness and sensitivity to others. We clearly live in a moment where many of the intelligentsia, many of the intellectual class in Western society have seemingly turned against the Christian faith, even turned against belief in God; so, it is becoming harder and harder in places like secular university campuses...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

To get a hearing for the faith. So Paul shows us...you know, do not get into name calling, do not get into sort of us against them, but find points where you can identify with those who differ from you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is what the theologian Richard Mouw has been talking about for years now, public civility; and you know, a key verse there comes from I think the first letter of Peter, where Peter says: Always be ready to give a defense for your faith, but do it with gentleness and respect; and that is what Paul does here. He does not, you know...ours is a day of split-screen shouting matches on cable TV and angry demonstrations, sometimes Christians leading the way, and screaming at non-Christian opponents. That is not Paul's style, it was not Jesus' style, it was not Peter's style. He is sensitive, he is polite, he is also, though, in tune with their culture...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is able to quote their poets approvingly where they get it right. He knows that you have to come at people where they are at.

DAVE BAST

So, clearly Paul is reading other books besides the Bible...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

He is reading the books that the culture has produced. He is addressing deep-felt needs and hungers that exist in the human heart; the hunger to somehow reach out, even people who do not believe in God have a hunger for transcendence—have a hunger for something more—the unknown God or the unknown...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think they want to know that they are part of a larger story, which is why Paul shows this theology of history, we could call it.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is not just history, it is God's story, and you are a character in that story; and people today want to know that; and that story has a climax, and it is called the resurrection of Jesus, and that is our hope for our future; it is the end of the story; it previews the great consummation, the recreation of all things. People today want to know they are part of something bigger, and I think, for us today, too, letting them know that history is not just something that is a random series of events, it is God's story, everybody is a character in it, whether you know it or not; but there is hope, there is resurrection. We have a future; thanks be to God.

DAVE BAST

Well, thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we review the end of the book of Acts to see how it all calls us to participate in God's mission.

Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to let us know scripture passages or topics you would like to hear us discuss on *Groundwork*.

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Printed on June 25, 2026