



HG256: Annual District Church Meeting 2023 ***Swimming Against The Flow***

Acts 17:16-34

Home Group Study Notes

23 April 2023 - Revd Paul A. Carr



PLEASE COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN
ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION
BEFORE THE MEETING!

*Don't forget to take your Bible to Home Group
with you, along with any previous notes and other
resources which might be helpful for your discussions.*



Welcome (10 mins) *Ice Breaker*

Have you ever visited Athens? What was your experience? If not, have you visited a place mentioned in the Bible? How did it make you feel?



Looking Upwards (10 mins) *Worship*

In your time of worship, you may want to sing Songs of Praise; listen to a Worship CD, as well as using Meditations; Bible Readings; Prayers ...



HG256: Annual District Church Meeting 2023 *Swimming Against The Flow*

Acts 17:16-34

Home Group Sermon

23 April 2023 - Revd Paul A. Carr

Introduction

If there is one struggle that is common to every Christian, clergy or otherwise, then it must be the struggle with peer pressure. It can be hard standing firm on Biblical principles when those around us seem to be going in the opposite direction. Whether it be at work or at home or at school or Uni, it's hard work 'swimming against the flow'.

The battles will be different for each of us. You name it, at every stage of our Christian lives, young or old, there will be pressure on us to go the way of the world and not the way of the Lord. It might be pressure to reject God's moral teaching - none more-so than the blessing of same-sex marriage. For some of you, sexual equality LGBT, Trans and Non-Binary as part of the fabric of your workplace and it is extremely difficult to voice an opinion.

We're often under pressure to keep quiet and say nothing which is why this passage in Acts 17, can be such a wonderful encouragement to us. So how does Paul stand firm in Athens, the most intellectually important city in the ancient world, when everyone is going in the opposite direction?

A bit like Elijah in 1 Kings 17, God is directing Paul to think outside the box. I want to suggest that Paul demonstrates three qualities in this passage which will be helpful to us if we are to stand firm for Jesus today. He had:

1) A Passion for the Glory of God vs16-17

Paul is in Athens a city past its prime - Rome is now the new dominant force – but Athens is still the centre for all things cultural in the ancient world. It was the home of democracy, philosophy, architecture, theatre, and many other intellectual pursuits. It was a modern-day Venice, Paris and Oxford all rolled into one, but slightly fraying at the edges. And if you were a tourist wandering around, you probably couldn't fail to be impressed with what you saw.

Even today, Athens still boasts major attractions: The Parthenon, the temple of Athena, still dominates the city - which in Paul's day would have been even more impressive. The Temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Inside there was an enormous statue of Athena, the patron goddess of Athens, covered in gold and ivory. Not only that, there were majestic civic buildings everywhere including the Agora, the famous business centre of Athens.

According to Pausanias, a sort of Bill Bryson of his day, who produced his own Rough Guide to the Mediterranean, Athens had 30,000 statues of gods and goddesses in its midst. An extraordinary fact given that there were only 10,000 people living in the city. No wonder Luke said the city was full of idols.

Now, what would you do if you were Paul with a few days to spare? You'd probably get out your Rough Guide to Athens and start ticking the sites off on your map. We'd take a few photos and selfies so you could say you'd been there. Here's me in front of Athena. Here's Paula standing next to a statue of Aphrodite! And so on!

But not Paul, vs 16: *“While Paul was waiting ... he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.”* In fact, he’s more than distressed, he’s deeply moved with anger and outrage by the blatant idolatry that exists in Athens and he’s livid that God’s glory and honour is being given to another. And that should be our reaction wherever we see idolatry, too. We should be distressed by people bowing down to the gods of materialism, sex, money, career - even family.

Paul doesn’t just grind his teeth and stamp his feet. His passion for God’s glory causes him to act. Vs 17: *“So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.”*

There is a direct link between Paul’s distress and motivation for his evangelistic activities. He reasons in the synagogue and meets people in the marketplace. In other words, he chats with the (religious) people where they are, and he chats with the pagans where they are - the marketplace. For us that could be the Chequers or Gail’s or the gym or the hobby group or ? It’s a simple but brilliant strategy. And it flows from his passion for God’s glory. But there’s a second characteristic Paul demonstrates here, which was:

2) An Understanding of the Character of God vs18-28

The more we understand who God is, the more we will have a passion for his glory and the honour of his name. And that is precisely what Paul explains as he is brought before the government of Athens to explain his actions and his beliefs. Let’s pick up the story in vs 18: *“A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute 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. 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? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean.”*

Some of the philosophers are greatly intrigued by what Paul has to say. The ancient Greeks didn’t believe in an afterlife, but they are keen to hear more. So, Paul agrees to meet them more formally in the Areopagus (Mars Hill), a bit like the House of Lords today. It would have been a very intimidating place to speak as they accuse him of bringing in foreign gods and strange ideas.

But notice what he does. Let’s read from vs 22: *“Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 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. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.”*

Paul begins by catching their attention and giving them a backhanded compliment. Yes, they are very religious, but Paul isn’t saying they all worship the same God or that all roads lead to God. They may be religious, but they are ignorant. They don’t understand and they cannot see.

So, Paul says to them: *“Look, I’m going to tell you about the God you don’t know.”* He uses their religiosity as a way in to explaining the true and living God and he gives them four characteristics about God and destroys a number of their misconceptions in the process:

a) God is the Creator. Vs 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 hands.”* The Athenians, who had so many stories about gods sleeping with other gods to bring the cosmos into being, had to be told about the one true creator God.

b) God is the Sustainer. Vs 25: *“And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.”* The Greeks spent much of their time appeasing the wrath of their gods by giving gifts. The gods in Greek mythology thrived on human sacrifices. But Paul says the true God doesn’t need anyone.

We cannot take one breath without him giving it to us. And were he to have a break for one second, the universe would be destroyed.

c) God is the Ruler. Vs 26: *“From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.”* It is God who determines the course of human history. He is the one who rules over our lives. And, contrary to what many people think, he’s not distant. He is near, a God who is involved in the world.

d) God is our Father. Vs 28: *“For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’”* Paul is making a more general point that God is the Father of the human race. We are his children and totally dependent on him.

So, as Paul stood in that very intimidating atmosphere with the intelligentsia of the ancient world looking on him, he simply told them about God and his wonderful character, that he is the Creator, the Sustainer, the Ruler and the Father. And it was these truths that were the bedrock of Paul’s passion for God, and this gave Paul:

3) A Confidence in the Gospel of God vs 29-34

Paul has concluded his sermon and does he say: *“Well Athenians, it’s for you to decide - take it or leave it. It’s only my opinion anyway, and you are very intelligent and wise!”* No! He tells them that God commands them to repent. To turn back to Him.

Let’s read from vs 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 man’s design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 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 all men by raising him from the dead.”*

Paul would have said how Jesus showed by his life and teaching that he was God in the flesh, how he died on the cross for our sin. But here Luke just tells us the bare bones. In Paul’s day some trusted in Jesus, whilst others scoffed and sneered.

But it’s worth noting that Paul, in the face of this intimidating crowd, simply explains the gospel. He didn’t change it to suit his hearers. He may have come at them from a slightly different angle, but he didn’t change the message. He had confidence in the gospel that it was the gospel for all people at all times – even if it caused him to be thrown in jail.

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, 3:7-9, which he wrote from prison for preaching about the Lord Jesus, wrote: *“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him ...”*

Paul thinks that all those good works and privileges are rubbish. Paul says literally that all his good deeds are dung (KJV), but the word is far stronger than that in the Greek - our translations are just too embarrassed to use it. But Paul makes no apologies. He wants us to see how deeply offensive to God false confidence is! Despite the fact he has an impressive CV, Paul makes it clear that his confidence is in Christ alone.

Paul teaches that if we want to grow in maturity, our true confidence should be in Jesus only. It’s not that Paul is not thankful for his background. You only have to look at Romans 9 to see how appreciative Paul is for his Jewish heritage. But Paul has discovered that the only way he can get right with God, is to accept what Jesus has done for him. Because compared to the *surpassing greatness* of knowing Jesus as Lord and Saviour, everything else is a pile of dung!

This zealous Pharisee turned into the zealous missionary for Jesus. This same Jesus he persecuted (Acts 9) became his Saviour, Lord, treasure and pearl of great price. Because of his conversion experience, you might say Paul traded a list of accomplishments for a list of afflictions. Paul writes about his experiences in his letter to the church in Corinth in 2 Corinthians 11:23b-28 and lists 23 different 'dangers' he's faced for the Gospel's sake. That's some list! He lost friends, colleagues, his home, his security, his status and more. I wonder what some of us may lose come July. But you must understand that Paul isn't complaining, nor is he bragging. For Paul was committed to Jesus and viewed everything done in His name as 'gain.' True confidence also gives us hope.

If ever there was a time for all of us to draw close to Jesus, it is now and as we do so, continue to offer to the world the hope and stability the gospel can give through this current crisis, bringing hope, and an eternal perspective, to the very pressing situation in which we will soon find ourselves.

Conclusion

If you have a passion for God's glory, then you will hate idolatry. It will drive you to explain God's character and works to those who need to hear it. You will have confidence that God's gospel is the only gospel that saves. And you will be able to stand when all around are falling, you will keep 'going against the flow' because you know you serve the true and living God. And to him belongs all glory, honour and praise. Where, I wonder, where is your confidence? What governs your decisions: *your* politics, *your* security, *your* family, *your* denomination, *your* views of God?

In 2017 the hymn writer Keith Getty, writer of 'In Christ Alone' amongst many others, was awarded an OBE in the Queen's annual birthday honours. He was the first hymn writer to be honoured by for contemporary Christian music. Getty responded to his award, and the nature of the hymns he writes, by saying: "*Nominal, shallow Christianity has no future, we must proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord.*" So! Let me ask you:

1) *Is there anything in your life that is drawing your attention away from Jesus?* For the Philipians it was the threat of false teachers, but for us it could be anything. It could be a present relationship, it could be something you are holding on to from the past, it could be worry or fear about the future. Whatever it is, let me encourage you to fix your eyes firmly on Jesus, and guard against anyone or anything that would draw your attention away from Him.

2) *When it comes to acceptance before God, what are you placing your confidence in?* It basically comes down to two options. Are you trusting yourself, or are you trusting Jesus? Are you trusting your background and achievements, or are you trusting Jesus? Are you trusting in your own accomplishments or are you trusting in Jesus? Our accomplishments, as Paul says, are a mixed bag of half-successes and total failures, sin that runs deep, and outright rebellion against God. The Bible says that even our best actions are as filthy rags before God.

3) *Do you want to know Jesus more than anything else?* Do you want to know the power of his resurrection in your life? Are you prepared to share in the fellowship of his sufferings so you can get there? Knowing Jesus is the greatest thing of all. Why be satisfied with anything else?

© Revd Paul A. Carr, 23 April 2023

Emmanuel Church Text for 2023

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace. Numbers 6:24-26



Looking Upwards (40 mins)

Bible Study

Read the text for this study, and any references given, then answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to listen to the sermon and/or read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss some, or all, your answers with your Home Group and, remember, these questions are only a guide to start your discussions.

1: Paul had a passion for the ‘Glory of God’, vs16-17. Name one thing which you have a passion for as a Christian.

2: Paul was distressed, vs16, to see Athens full of idols. What distresses you the most about:

a) Billericay

b) Society at large

3: What inspires you the most about Paul’s address in vs18-28?

4: Paul had complete confidence in the Gospel, vs29-34. Do you have that same confidence? Why? Why not?

5: Paul paid a heavy price for ‘swimming against the flow’ - 2 Corinthians 11:23b-28. What challenges do you face in trying to live a Christian life in today’s world?

6: As we enter into a new church year, what do you think are the greatest challenges facing Emmanuel?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



Looking Inwards (15 mins) Caring For Each Other

Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an opportunity to share, not something you have to do, however, 'It's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?



Looking Outwards (15 mins) Concern For Others

Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours or church, which you would like to share (please be sure not pass on anything that is confidential or which you think the person concerned would not wish to be shared) for:

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?

Emmanuel Church, Laindon Road, Billericay, Essex. CM12 9LD

P 01277 632120 E Emmanueloffice@billericaychurches.org W Emmanuel-church.info
FB [Emmanuel Church Billericay](https://www.facebook.com/EmmanuelChurchBillericay) T [EmmanuelCM12](https://www.facebook.com/EmmanuelCM12) YT [Emmanuel Church Billericay](https://www.facebook.com/EmmanuelChurchBillericay)

Part Of The Billericay & Little Burstead Team Ministry