

Engaging Culture with the Gospel

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Date: 20 October 2024

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[0 : 00] every way. But Paul didn't back down. Paul wasn't shy. And instead, what he did was he saw an opportunity to share Jesus within the culture in which he found himself.

So here's the big question. How do we engage with a culture that seems so far from God without compromising the message of the gospel? How do we reach people where they are, use terminology that they understand, grab them where their thought processes are, rather than using insider church language, without compromising the truth, the message, and the eternality of the gospel? So that's the question before us. How do we accomplish that?

And I think Paul did a great job being the missionary, being the person that Paul was. He was able to be a certain thing with his own people, the Jews. He was able to be a different person, if you will, with those who were believers within the church. And he was able to be a different person with those who were in the world and were from a totally foreign and different culture.

Basically, Paul was the same person, but Paul was able to speak a different language. He was able to connect with people in totally different ways, depending upon the culture and depending upon where he found himself. And I believe Paul gives us a great example of how we can be this same kind of person in all of the different relationships we find ourselves in, at the ballpark, at school, at work, at family functions, at reunions where family may or may not share our faith that we have in Jesus Christ.

And see how Paul became a bridge. He became a bridge from God to a lost world who didn't understand, who didn't even know who Jesus was.

[2 : 15] So Paul became that bridge that they could be shown who Jesus was. They could be introduced to the creator of the universe and to the savior who held the answer for all the questions that they had.

There's a reason why all these different philosophies existed. They tried to answer life's existential questions. There's got to be more to life than what I see. There's got to be something or someone or something above and beyond me.

So that's how all these philosophies originated. How to answer the questions that are pretty much in everybody's mind. That's why the Old Testament said God created eternity in their hearts. Every culture, whether it's in the deepest, darkest jungle or in the busiest inner city, people have some kind of inkling that there's something more, that there is something beyond us.

And how they relate to that is going to determine what belief system they engage in. So Paul was somebody who stepped into the culture.

He was someone who connected with people where they are, used the language that they understood and then built a bridge, became a bridge, to present to them the truth of Jesus Christ right where people were.

[3 : 38] And so this morning, we're going to explore how we, in the 21st century, can do the exact same thing like Paul did. How can we step into the culture around us, engage thoughtfully, and present Jesus clearly.

In your bulletins, we have our note sheet if you would like to follow along. We also, again this week, have if you would like to follow along and dive deeper into the message this week, our five-day devotion that deals with each of these sections that we're covering this morning.

Let's unpack Paul's story and see how we can be a bridge for the gospel in our own lives. So let's start looking at how Paul stepped into the culture around him.

We're going to start in verse number 16, but in verse number 15, we find that there was a lot going on in Thessalonica and there were some troubles there for Paul and he had to get out of town.

So the believers sent Paul away. Paul and Silas, Silas stayed, and Timothy stayed there in Thessalonica until Paul said, I need them in Athens.

[4 : 53] So while Paul was waiting for Timothy and Silas to meet him, verse 16 says, Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.

Therefore, he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews. That was Paul's custom. He would go to the synagogue if there was one and he would reason with the Jews. He would discuss also with the Gentile, those who were searching for God.

And also, it says, and in the marketplace every day, daily, with those who happened to be there.

So when Paul arrived in Athens, he didn't just stay in the synagogue waiting for people to come to him. What he did was, he walked around the marketplace where people bought, people sold, where there were the shops, and he did some, he did a little bit of looking around the town.

So instead of waiting for people to come to him, he went out to them, to the marketplace, the very heart of the city's culture, and also the city's ideas that Paul gazed upon when he looked around and it grieved him.

[6 : 14] I mean, it really hurt the Apostle Paul to see the lack of understanding that these Athenians had and how lost they were.

Can you imagine not having the hope of Jesus Christ, not having the hope of eternity that we have in our hearts, wondering if we are right, wondering what's going on, and these Athenian philosophers, the Epicureans, the Stoics, and I'm sure among others, who all they did was they spent their time discussing and wondering what was the latest truth or what was the latest trend or fad in philosophy that would come along.

And so these people gathered to discuss philosophy and he went and he met with them daily. And Paul understood that if he wanted to reach people, he needed to go where they were most comfortable, not where Paul was.

And so he went to them and he paid attention to what moved them. I can imagine Paul spent a little bit of a reconnaissance mission looking around and noting, yep, I'll talk about that.

Yes, I'll mention that. This is something that I might be able to use to connect the gospel with what I see around me. Even if it made Paul a little uncomfortable, and obviously it did.

[7 : 45] Verse 16 says, the Greek word that's used is the word from which we get our English word paroxysm. I mean, he had a violent reaction to what he saw around him.

It hurt his heart deeply to see the ignorance of these Athenians. They were the heart of culture, if you will.

Even today, people go to Athens and look at the statues and look at the architecture and the beautiful architecture. Much of it has been preserved throughout these centuries.

And yet, Paul realized that with all of this technology that they had, with all of this beautiful architecture, with all of these things he saw, with all this culture, he saw ignorance.

He saw empty hearts. And he saw empty philosophies that couldn't answer life's most basic questions that every one of us struggle with on a daily basis.

[8 : 48] So, the first thing that Paul did, and what we can learn from Paul, is to step into the culture. To step into the culture.

So, Paul goes in, and he goes around the marketplace, and he spent time daily with those who were there in the marketplace.

So, to put it simply, Paul arrived in Athens, not as a sightseer, but as a missionary. So, he's not just there as a sightseer, taking pictures.

Of course, there were no cameras during that time. He might have done some sketching. I don't know. But he didn't go as a sightseer. He went as a missionary. The late Noel O'Lyons, who for many years was the director of Greater Europe Missions, used to say, Europe is looked over by millions of visitors and is overlooked by millions of Christians.

Europe is looked over by millions of visitors and is overlooked by millions of Christians. What did he mean by that? He meant it was a field that was ripe for harvest.

[10 : 02] People were there and needed to hear the gospel, and many Christians just looked beyond and just went as sightseers and overlooked the opportunities. And we do the same.

We overlook opportunities that God places right before us on a fairly regular basis. Now, Athens, as we know from history and we know from archaeology as well, was recognized as a center of culture, was recognized as a center of education as well.

And they had what we might consider cultured paganism. They were cultured, but they were pagans. They had a very cultured society. They had a very cultured society. In many ways, there was a lot of technology that they had used in building the buildings and erecting all of the stone that they did and much in the way that the Romans did with their architecture.

cultured but yet, they were still pagan. They were fueled by idolatry. They were fueled by novelty. Luke talks about in verse number 21.

They just wanted to hear the latest. If it sounded neat, they wanted to hear about it and they wanted to talk about it and also philosophy. Paul knew that idolatry, he says in verse 16 that he was grieved in his heart when he saw all the idols there.

[11 : 28] Paul knew because he wrote in 1 Corinthians that idolatry was demonic because there were demons behind all of this push for idols.

We see that in 1 Corinthians chapter 10 verses 14 through 23 where Paul brings that out and that many of the gods the Greeks had were only characters and stories that were unable to change people's lives.

There were just stories about these Greek characters. Paul talks about that in 1 Corinthians chapter 8 verses 1 through 6. So with all their culture, with all of their wisdom, with all of their wisdom, the Greeks did not know the one and the true God.

1 Corinthians 1 18 through 25 where the apostle Paul says with all their knowledge, with all their wisdom, they missed it. They don't know the creator God.

So Paul connected with people in the marketplace. As we think about stepping into our culture around us, it reminds me of Tim Tebow who gives us a modern example I believe of being an open witness for Jesus Christ, a modern example who did this with courage and with conviction.

[12 : 49] Tim Tebow is a former NFL quarterback not only known for his athletic skills but also for his outspoken Christian faith. As a matter of fact, he became famous for what became known as Tebowing or Tebowing where after a great play he would bow in the end zone and was praying to God.

He did this on national television and kneeled in prayer in the field which sparked some widespread discussion and he was vilified in the press as well because of his faith.

But he was willing to live out his faith publicly. And one thing that Tebow has done is he's used his notoriety to champion his faith, to talk publicly even on TV about his faith in Jesus Christ.

He hasn't been ashamed about it even when it meant facing criticism. So he used his platform to engage others in the gospel. So like Paul in Athens, we need to understand if we have a platform that we can use if people trust us, let's use that to be a springboard to talk to people about the Lord Jesus.

So for us today, I think that means engaging the culture around us, in our workplaces, in our neighborhoods. you know, we can't just stay in our comfort zones expecting people to come to us.

[14 : 18] And we've seen this in the last few months when we've gone out into our community and we've touched people's lives. We've made a difference in people's lives around us. We see many of our young people in our Awana ministry on Wednesday nights.

Many from the backpacks that we gave out just before school started. So we're seeing how connecting and just going out where people are. Sometimes it's as simple as providing a felt need.

Sometimes it's just as simple as meeting people where they are using some things they're concerned about, things that they may sense as a need in their life and meeting that need.

So we need to be aware of what shapes people's worldview, what makes people think the way they think, even if it challenges us. So like Paul, we don't have to adopt the culture, but we can step into it, understand its pulse, and I believe the most effective followers of Jesus Christ are those who don't hide themselves from culture, but who study culture.

Because if we don't know what is going on in people's minds, we won't be able to effectively connect with them. They'll look at us like, where did you come from?

[15 : 38] I'm not even thinking about that. I'm not concerned about what you're talking about, but when we can talk to them about things they are concerned about, and then build that bridge to where God has spoken about what it is that they're concerned about, then I believe we can make a big difference.

Just the same way Paul did. And we're going to see in next week's message exactly how Paul did that. Exactly how he used one of their idols, one of their very own idols, to tell them, you know, that idol that you have there, let me explain to you who that idol represents.

And he then went on to explain that it stood for the one and the true God. So in today's world, culture is shaped by media, culture is shaped by the news, our culture is shaped by so many different things.

So we grapple with a world that's shaped by digital media, shaped by media like CNN and Fox News and others. We need to be able to see through all of that and see what the Bible has to say about all of this.

So let's take a page from Paul's book and step into the culture around us, be ready to engage with compassion and truth. So the question this morning is what are some practical ways that we can step out of our comfort zones and into our culture around us, just like Paul did?

[17 : 04] What are some ways that we can step into our culture around us like Paul did? What do you all think? Some practical ways, some things that we can do, just like Paul did, to engage people in our world?

about to have some thoughts.

How about engaging somebody, anybody have grandkids that are kids that are playing sports or in 4-H? When you're in the stands, how about engaging conversation with somebody you don't know?

ask them how they're doing, asking a little bit about them, and then be that bridge, build that connection. What are some other ways? What's that?

Social media, exactly. When you hear something that is just totally untrue, or just like the Athenians who were, they were believing in something that was empty.

[18 : 25] How can we, we can say, well, have you considered what the Bible has to say about? So there's no point in letting the devil have it. Why don't we, just why don't we let God have a say in it?

So very, very good. Those are practical ways that we can, we can engage with our culture around us. So having established a presence in the heart of the Athenian culture, Paul didn't stop there.

He moved forward with a strategy to engage thoughtfully those people around him. So how do we do this? Let's take a look at what Paul did, how he engaged with them thoughtfully and not combatively.

Let's look at verses 18 and 19. Then, so Paul daily, verse 17, he was engaging with the people in the marketplace day by day.

He would walk around, he would talk to people, he would engage them in conversation. And then, verse 18, certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him.

[19 : 30] So they went out and they sought Paul, they encountered Paul, and some said, what does this babbler want to say? Others said, he seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.

Oh my, he preached Jesus. Well, that's what Paul did, and I believe that's what we should do. We should never water down our faith. We should never water down the gospel.

Just because it might be uncomfortable for people to hear, they need to hear it. Why? Because sometimes, even though people may not want to be confronted with their false beliefs, if we want them to know the Savior, the Messiah, Jesus Christ, we have to tell people about who Jesus is.

So he was telling them about Jesus, and he was talking about the resurrection, and in verse 19, and they took him and brought him to the Oropagus, saying, they brought him to that central place, may we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak.

So what Paul did was he engaged, and what we should also be willing and able to do is engage people thoughtfully, not combatively, not get in an argument, not try to win the argument, but rather thoughtfully, try to reach people where they are and bring them to where God wants them to be.

[21 : 10] So when Paul encountered these philosophers in Athens, he didn't start by arguing with them or trying to prove them wrong. Instead, what he did was he found common ground to start the conversation.

We see that in verses 22 and following the way Paul did it. The way he found the common ground and the way he engaged with them, he listened to their ideas, he listened to their thoughts, and he used their curiosity to build a bridge to the gospel.

In verse 17, it says he reasoned with the Jews and the Gentiles who were there in the synagogue. And then in the following verses, he talks also about going into the marketplace and engaging with those people.

What did some of the philosophers call him? They called him a babbler. Literally, that word means one who picks up seed.

It meant the birds. If any of you go down from Ryan and turn on sale in the parking lot there where, was it Albertsons and Planet Fitness is, right there by the street, there's a lady that goes out and throws bread pretty much every morning.

[22 : 35] And so when you're passing by there, there are, there is a ton of pigeons eating there. And they're picking up.

Just like they pick up seeds, they'll pick up bread. And the word was used for those birds who pick up seeds or one who pick up seeds.

And it was, literally, it was applied to a person who doesn't have their own thoughts, but picks up thoughts from here, from there, from there, and then talks about that like it's their own thoughts.

So it was, it was kind of used derogatorily about someone who just picks from this, picks from that, and then talks about it. Just one who picks up seeds. So they said, well, you know what, Paul doesn't know what he's talking about.

He's just a babbler. And then, but they said, well, what, maybe he's talking about some, some new God. He talks about this Jesus. Who's this Jesus he's talking about?

[23 : 37] Well, and, you know, when we think about engaging thoughtfully with culture, you know, it reminds me of another character from a number of years ago.

Some of you may have heard of the fellow named Martin Luther. He was early 16th century. He was a theologian. He was a German monk.

and he was one who began, was part of the Protestant Reformation. And what he did was he sought to reform some of the practices that he saw within the Roman Catholic Church.

And he went to a church door and he nailed what were called his 95 theses, his 95 things that he saw that did not fit with the Word of God.

And what he wanted to do was he started, he wanted to begin a discussion. He wanted to begin, let's talk about this, he wanted to begin reform from the inside.

[24 : 39] Well, obviously it did not work the way he expected it to, but he wanted to engage his current culture. And so Paul finds common ground, Paul finds things where they are, and he engaged with them with respect, but he also engaged with clarity.

He talked about Jesus, he talked about the resurrection. These two schools of thought, the Epicureans and the Stoics, you know, they were simply trying to make sense of life apart from God.

How do we make sense of life? How do we make sense of family? How do we make sense of making a living? How do we make sense of growing old and dying? So he did, he connected with them where they were rather than trying to just simply win an argument.

So what if we focused on grace and understanding? When was the last time you had someone that you were talking with and they just totally disagreed with what you had to say?

And you said, you know, why don't you tell me a little bit about what you believe? And just share with me why you believe what you believe.

[25 : 53] And just listen to them. And find, try to find some common ground. It may be that they want to get right with God.

They just don't have the right way to get right with God. They don't know it yet. So find something in common. Maybe it's making sense out of life.

Maybe it's being overwhelmed with family issues, overwhelmed with health and family and work and all of this.

And then maybe use that as a bridge to say, you know, God speaks about giving rest. God talks about providing a rest that we don't have to work to meet a standard or we don't have to work to get right with God.

And just use this as a bridge. So the question we need to ask ourselves, how can we ensure that our conversations are characterized by grace rather than defensiveness or argumentation?

[27 : 00] So think about how can we do that? How can we talk with, speak with grace? How can we help people in this way? So think about a family gathering or the office discussions where this might come up.

You know, we could choose to argue and turn people off or we could choose to grasp something that is common, a common desire that we have and then use that as a bridge for the gospel.

But finally this morning, as we go through our next couple of verses, let's focus on how Paul presented Jesus clearly to those in Athens. So after engaging with the Athenians, finding common ground, Paul didn't stop there.

He moved the conversation onto a onto the core of the message, Jesus and the resurrection, just like we saw in verse number 18. Verse 20 says, they said, for you are bringing some strange things to our ears.

They hadn't heard anything like that before. And therefore, we want to know what these things mean. And Luke interjects this.

[28 : 11] I don't know if Luke meant this disparagingly or not, or was just simply a commentary on how the Athenians spent their time. He says, for all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

So what Jesus did, and I think we should learn from that, is we should be able to share Jesus clearly. Share Jesus clearly. You know, don't waste time on religion.

Don't waste time on denominations. Don't waste time on picking fruit of what they believe and what their doctrines are within their faith system. Just go directly to Jesus Christ and talk about who Jesus is.

So in a noisy world with so many competing messages around us, the clarity of the gospel, I believe, can shine through as a clarion of hope.

Because the world is full of, I think, and I believe, where we can come in and say, this is what Jesus promises. This is what God promises to us through Jesus, the Messiah.

[29 : 20] And this is how he can change our life. So Paul confidently shared the message of Jesus Christ. And he shared the message of the resurrection. Think about the resurrection, how it affects people.

People are afraid that most people are afraid to die, right? You know, that's one of the strongest desires that you and I have is the desire to live.

And we don't want our life to end. And the resurrection is the truth of the resurrection for those who are in Jesus Christ. We leave this earth to be directly in the arms of Jesus, to be with God.

And this is what we call the blessed hope, the hope that we have in Jesus Christ. So this message of Jesus is unmistakable. So while the Athenians were familiar with many philosophies, because that's all they did, Luke says, they spent time.

Well, what do you think? What do you think? Well, what's the latest philosophy? Paul shared something fresh. And Paul shared something transformative. If it wasn't just another philosophy, it was a powerful truth of the resurrection which offered hope and change.

[30 : 37] So for us, it means more than just being culturally aware. It means more than just being good conversationalists. It means being able to share clearly the message of Jesus with those around us.

Because Jesus offers everything that these philosophies were trying to accomplish. Jesus offers everything that you and I, excuse me, would ever, ever need.

So as we wrap up this morning, let's take a moment to reflect on the wonderful opportunities that you and I have. At work, in the marketplace, standing in line at the grocery store, being in the stands while our kids, our grandkids are competing.

We have opportunities. At work, around the, in the break room, we have opportunities to share Jesus all around us. Just like Paul, we face similar challenges today.

We face all kinds of different philosophies as well. But here's the good news. We have the same opportunity Paul had. We have the same message that Paul had as well.

[31 : 50] So we can step into the culture around us, engage thoughtfully with those who were there, and share the hope that we have in Jesus Christ.

You see, God is with you, guiding you along the way. The Holy Spirit says and promises that He will give you the words. If somebody asks you a question about your faith, God promises that He, through the Holy Spirit, will give you an answer that you can answer for them.

And if you don't have the best answer that you think, He'll say, well, you know, let me see if I can find that answer for you. And then let's get back together. And then let's, let's see what God has to say about it.

So here's my challenge for you this week. Find one area of culture that you can step into. One area within your sphere of influence that you can step into and you can talk to someone about Jesus Christ.

Maybe it's a tough conversation you've been avoiding at work. Maybe it's a tough conversation with a family member who believes differently. Maybe engage them in common ground and then use that as a segue.

[32 : 58] To share Jesus Christ and the resurrection. So show them the love of Jesus in a way that resonates with them. Remember, Jesus is the hero of the story. Jesus is the hero of our story.

He stepped into our world. He engaged with us. He offered Himself as the bridge between God and us.

Let's be the same. And together, let's make a difference. One conversation at a time. So let's go out and be the light of the world that our world so desperately needs.

Let's pray. Father, we thank You for Your goodness and Your mercy and Your grace. We thank You that You have given us a hope that is beyond our wildest imagination.

that we can be right with You and that we can spend eternity with You one day. Guide us as we realize that You have left us here to be...

[34 : 01] forgive us as we realize our relationship that can be past. That can be loved in all our stories that we can intentionally Hur laws and everything be planned And these coming back Are we shutting down to people who created How are we conceive ethics of mindfulness and tendency that what practices were true