

The Acts of the Holy Spirit

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens

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Thessalonica – success and opposition ([17:1-9](#))

Again, we see the familiar pattern of ministry and results:

- Paul and Silas first went to the synagogue, explaining and demonstrating from the scriptures to the Jews in that town that the Messiah had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and that Jesus was that Messiah.
- Many were persuaded and converted.
- Envious Jews reject both the message and the messengers, and form a plot to discredit and eject them from town.

Paul tells us later in the New Testament that while they were in Thessalonica, they received financial support from the Christians in Philippi (Philippians 4:15-16), to help with this successful work among the Thessalonians. Congregations supporting other congregations in need, and congregations supporting missionary activity, is also a pattern established early and on display often in the early life of the church.

The Jews ... set all the city in an uproar: As on the first missionary journey in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:45, 50), Iconium (Acts 14:2, 5), and Lystra (Acts 14:19), Paul and his group are opposed by a mob incited by “envious” Jewish leaders, i.e., those who rejected the Gospel that Paul preached.

...Attacked the house of Jason: Jason was a Christian in Thessalonica whose house seems to have been a center for the church. When the “evil men” from the marketplace did not find Paul and Silas there, they attacked Jason himself, and some believers who were with him. When accusing these Christians before the rulers of the city, these “evil men” gave an unintended compliment to the

effectiveness of God's work through Paul and Silas! Effectively, their complaint was "these men have radically impacted our world, and nothing seems the same!" I wonder if anyone complains about the effectiveness of Christians that way today?!

Jesus came to Earth not only to be our teacher, but to turn our world upside-down. Powerful and eminent people of this world are at the top of the pyramid, tending to look down on the weak and insignificant. But Jesus flips that pyramid and says, "If you want to come to Me, you have to come like a little child." As Paul says, God has chosen the foolish and weak things of the world to confound the wise (1 Corinthians 1:27), and so God turns the world's power-pyramid upside down.

In Luke 12:16-21, Jesus gave a great example of this upside-down thinking when He spoke of a rich man who amassed great wealth, and all he could think about was building bigger barns to store all his wealth. We would declare such a man to be a great "moral" example and civic leader, and would consider him a prominent citizen. Jesus turned that whole concept upside down, calling the man a fool, because he had become utterly self-reliant, to the point of ignoring or rejecting his relationship with God.

In a sense, then, here in Acts, the Holy Spirit is working through Paul and Silas to turn the world right side-up again.

"These are... saying there is another king; Jesus": This was to raise the fear that their city might become a hotbed of political rebellion against Caesar.

Of course, such fears were unfounded. Though the gospel at times carries political implications, it makes Christians better citizens than before.

One commentator suggests, "It may be for this reason that Paul avoided the use of 'kingdom' and 'king' in his letters to his converts, lest Gentile imperial authorities misconstrue them to connote opposition to the empire and emperor." (Longenecker)

When they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go: Basically, the Roman magistrates did not care what you believed. But when the public order was disrupted by riots, they came down with an iron hand. If things got out of hand, it wouldn't be long until the Emperor dispatched troops to restore order,

and no one wanted that. So Jason had to post a bond, even though he did not instigate the riot.

Evangelistic Success in Berea ([17:10-15](#))

The brethren immediately set Paul and Silas away by night to Berea: Paul and Silas flee Thessalonica quickly, not wanting to bring more persecution on the Christians there (or to jeopardize Jason's security deposit!)

Paul had so much more to say to these Christians, so he wrote the letter of I Thessalonians. Many scholars think that I Thessalonians was Paul's first letter that we have in the New Testament.

They went into the synagogue of the Jews: In Berea they follow their usual strategy, and found that their audience was more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica. Two things earned this compliment for the Bereans: first, they received the word with all readiness. Second, they searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

This is a great example for all Christians. The Bereans did not merely accept Paul's words at face value. Instead they studied the scriptures to discern whether what he was preaching was consistent with and supported by them. When they heard Paul preach and teach, their reaction wasn't just "Wow, he's a great speaker!" Nor was it "He's not very attractive, is he?", or "I don't like the way he talks," or "Goodness, what an entertaining preacher!" Instead, the Bereans wanted to know if this man was teaching the truth. And so they did what we all should do, they searched the Scriptures, and not just "one and done", but daily. They made it a point of diligent, extended study. Again, we see careful, methodical, and protracted consideration of eternally important matters!

Like the Bereans, we should "receive the word with all readiness", with open hearts. But we must also have clear heads, and when we hear a preacher, be a people who search the Scriptures daily to find out "whether these things are so." Consider: if the *apostle Paul* was worthy of this kind of close examination, how much more should teachers and preachers today be carefully measured by their concord with the Bible!

Therefore many of them believed: Paul had nothing to fear by the diligent searching of the Scriptures by the Bereans. They were not mere skeptics; they

were people of faith in the God who has left His word with them for their equipping, edification, and encouragement. Therefore many of them believed.

Unfortunately, unbelieving Jews from Thessalonica were not satisfied to force Paul out of their own city. They followed Paul to Berea to disrupt his work there, too.

‘Tis also a part of our familiar pattern. They stirred up the crowds against Paul (really, the Gospel!), just as they had in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra on the first missionary journey, and now in Thessalonica on the second missionary journey. By my count this is the fifth city Paul has been run out of by an angry mob, stirred up by jealous and/or corrupt, unbelieving, “church leaders.”

Immediately the brethren sent Paul away: The Christians in Berea sent Paul away to Athens, fearing for his life, and disruption of the work going on there. But Silas and Timothy remained there, because Paul wanted to leave them behind to take care of this new Christian church in Berea. Paul had a passion not just for making converts, but for *planting churches*. So if he personally could not stay in the city and continue with working with the Christians there, he wanted his trusted fellow missionaries to stay and do the job.

The Holy Spirit at Work in Athens ([17:16-21](#))

“...At Athens, his spirit was provoked within him”: Apparently Paul would have preferred to wait until Timothy and Silas came from Berea before he began ministry in earnest in Athens. But when he saw that the city was given over to idols, he was compelled to preach the gospel immediately.

As far as we know, Paul had never been to Athens before, and like any tourist, he was impressed by this famous and historical city. But when Paul toured the city, he was only depressed by the incredible idolatry he saw all around him.

The idea behind the phrase “given over to idols” (κατείδωλον οὔσαν, “kateidolon ousan”) is under, or we might say, *swamped by* idols. Paul saw the beauty of Athens, with the best of Greek sculpture and architecture. But he was disturbed that none of it was in honor of or praise to God.

Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue... and in the marketplace daily: Paul would preach wherever he could get an audience. In Athens that meant both in the synagogue, and in the open marketplace.

Athens was a cultured, educated city, proud of its history. It was also an intellectual center. While it had lost its political dominance under Roman rule, the Romans emulated and adopted much of Greek culture, philosophy, education, and even religious practice. Culturally speaking, Athens had enormous “mind share”, was still the intellectual capital of the Greco-Roman world, and so was quite different from any other city Paul had preached in.

Then certain Epicurean ... philosophers encountered him: The Epicureans pursued pleasure as the chief purpose in life, and valued highly the pleasure of a peaceful life, free from pain, disturbing passions, and superstitious fears. They were not atheistic in the sense of denying the existence of gods, but Epicureans believed that any gods that exist had no interest in the affairs of mankind.

Then certain ... Stoic philosophers encountered him: The Stoics were pantheists who emphasized moral sincerity, and a high sense of duty. They cultivated a spirit of proud dignity, and believed that suicide was better than a life lived with less dignity. Stoics believed that *everything* was god, and god was in everything. So they believed that all things, good or evil, were from “god”, and so nothing should be resisted. They believed there was no *discernable* direction or destiny for mankind.

So the audiences here were very different, and Paul would vary his approach accordingly. But the essence of Paul's message did not change. They all understood that he was preaching to them about Jesus and the resurrection. These intellectuals would have encountered all manner of religious and philosophical thought, yet this message from Paul was something new. The *novelty* of Paul's message earned him the invitation to the Areopagus.

The Sermon on Mars' Hill ([17:22-34](#))

Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious: Paul begins not with an exposition of Scripture -- which was his custom when dealing with Jews or Gentiles who would be familiar with the Old Testament – but instead he begins with general references to religion.

I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD: Paul understood that in their extensive pantheon of gods, the Greeks had an unknown god, who covered any god that may have been neglected. Athens was filled with statues dedicated TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Six hundred years before Paul, a

terrible plague came on the city and a man name Epimenides had the idea to let loose a flock of sheep through the town, and wherever one laid down, they would sacrifice that sheep to the god that had the nearest shrine or temple. If a sheep lay down near no shrine or temple, they would sacrifice the sheep TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.

He is Lord of heaven and earth: Paul proclaims to them the God who created everything, and yet is utterly distinct *from* His creation. Paul proclaimed that God was bigger than any temple, and in fact could not be represented by anything men could make with their hands.

In bringing this “novel” understanding of who God is to the people of Athens, Paul started at the beginning: God is Creator, and we are His creatures. This is very contrary to the “theologies” of the Epicureans and Stoics.

For in Him we live and move and have our being ... For we are also His offspring: These two quotes are from Greek poetry, attributed to Epimenides the Cretan (ca. 600 BC), who Paul quotes again in Titus 1:12, and Aratus (ca. 310 BC). Paul didn't quote these men because they were “prophets”, or because their teaching was Godly in any way. He quoted them because these specific words reflected a Biblical truth, and by using them he could build a bridge to his pagan audience.

...We are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone: As His offspring, we should have right ideas about God, and therefore must reject the wrong idea that gold or silver or stone could represent God.

Now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness: Paul progresses from knowing who God is as Creator, to who we are as His offspring, to our need to understand Him and worship Him in truth, to our accountability should we dishonor Him (judgment). Quite a progression! Paul wasn't preaching a "gentle" gospel in Athens. He boldly confronted commonly-held but wrong ideas about God, and even confronted them with the reality of Divine judgment.

He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man who He has ordained: For the first time, Paul here refers to Jesus. Not very seeker-friendly, is he? His first mention of Jesus presents Jesus as The Righteous Judge!. Paul did not want to leave the Athenians with the idea that Jesus was *only* a righteous judge. However,

he knows he will be stopped short before he can tell them everything he wants to about Jesus. So he gets quickly to what he wanted to speak about: The person and work of Jesus.

He has given assurance of this by raising Him from the dead: The emphasis on the resurrection here is vitally important. Paul sees the resurrection of Jesus as the assurance of the truth of His Gospel; it demonstrates that the person, teaching, and work of Jesus were all perfectly assured by God the Creator.

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: The resurrection was not a popular concept among Greek philosophers. Some thought Paul foolish for even believing such a thing, while others wanted to hear more about this new teaching. The Greeks were fond of the idea of the immortality of the *soul*, but not of the idea of the resurrection of the body. Influenced by Socrates/Plato, Aristotle, et al, they thought that anything material was innately evil, so the idea of a "glorified" body didn't make sense to them. They thought the ultimate glory would be a "higher form", or a "pure spirit."

Paul was just beginning his sermon. More than wanting to quote Greek poets, he wanted to tell them about Jesus. But as soon as he mentioned the resurrection, they stopped him short. Certainly, Paul discussed more with people one-on-one. But he was prevented from saying all he wanted to in his speech at the Areopagus. This Sermon is an interesting study for us, in that it demonstrates that the Spirit works though and reaches men and women in richly varied ways, all of which come down to the message of the Gospel. Tailoring the proclamation of the Gospel to the audience is not only allowed, but inspired. We should not presume to be smarter than God when it comes to selecting the words that "work the best." How do we know that? Because...

However, some men joined him and believed: Even if Paul didn't get to say all he wanted about Jesus, some did believe. Among those believing were a man named Dionysius, likely a member of the "court" of the Areopagus, and a woman named Damaris.

If we look at the "numbers", the sermon on Mars Hill might be considered a disappointing performance. But even if the Gospel was not received as widely as we would like here, we can be assured that it was perfect for that time and place among those people. This would be important training for Paul, too, as we see his focus on Jesus so clearly in all his New Testament letters.