

A World that needs you

In 1984 a large number of popular musicians banded together, literally, to raise money for the relief of poverty in Ethiopia. The charitable project was successful, and many dollars were raised for a worthy cause. But as worthy and admirable as the efforts were, the world actually needs more. Unfortunately man cannot live by bread alone. It needs something more if it is to live, that is, to really live. It needs 'every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'. And that's surprisingly where you and I come in. For God has chosen his church to be his mouthpiece in speaking to the world. And we the church should know that. Because we once stood in the world, and were hungry.

Icebreaker



Have you ever been involved in raising money for a charitable cause, or ever actively advocated for a political cause? What motivated you? And what was achieved? Share your stories.

Read: Acts 17:16-34

¹⁶ While Paul 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 the 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 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. 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 want to know what they mean." ²¹ (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

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. ²³ 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.

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. 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. 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. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

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. ³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ 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 everyone by raising him from the dead."

³² When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." ³³ At that, Paul left the Council. ³⁴ A few men 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.

Introduction



When the apostle Paul arrived in Athens, the great Greek city had already been in existence for 1,000 years. Even though it had been humbled by the Romans before Paul's lifetime, it still boasted proud civic structures, a rich business district, and impressive schools of philosophy, with past academic leaders such as Socrates and Plato. The famous Parthenon, built in the 5th century BC, was home to the goddess Athena, whose huge bronze statue dominated the precinct. But her temple was one of many, many, temples.

Dictionary

- Epicureans* Polytheistic Materialists, whose aim was happiness, and whose catchcry was *Carpe Diem*, 'Seize the Day'; and 'Death is nothing. There is nothing to fear.'
- Stoics* Pantheistic Rationalists, whose aim also was happiness, and whose catchcry was, *Que sera sera*, 'What will be will be'; and 'Do your duty.'
- Areopagus* A geographical feature, known as Mars Hill (Áreiós Págos), and used as a popular meeting place for a Council of that same name.

Question 1

(v16) On arrival, Paul seems to have surveyed the city and felt its heartbeat. What conclusion did he quickly come to?

Question 2

(v17) So Paul went straight to work, seeking to bring some better light to the city. What can we learn from this attitude? What is the best way to do this? What would you say to

those who think that Paul was “a cultural-philistine and disturber of the peace, arrogantly foisting his religious views and opinions onto others, and that he should mind his own business and keep his religion to himself”?

Case Study 1

Kevin had been a keen Christian for some years, when one Christmastime he just snapped. Santa was being paraded through the shopping centre amid great fanfare, dancing elves, and joyful music. But Kevin intervened, wrestling Santa to the ground and pulling off his beard, and then calling on the astonished onlookers to repent of their idolatry and worship Jesus - the real “Reason for the Season”. How would you evaluate Kevin’s approach?



Question 3

In a number of places during this speech, Paul makes insightful connections with the Athenians in terms of acknowledging their religious architecture and quoting from their poets. Why do you think he did this? What are the advantages and dangers of this method? What are some things that you can think of, even need to think of, in trying to communicate meaningfully the things of the Christian Faith to your neighbours?

Question 4

Why do you think that Paul starts his explanation to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers at Creation, rather than at ‘Matthew, Mark, Luke and John’?

Question 5

(v29) Paul comes to the application of his address by calling for a response. This seems to be always part of Paul’s evangelistic speeches. What should we learn from this?

Case Study 2

Jilly accompanied the church youth group to an evangelistic crusade that was being held in her city. She was certainly impressed and clearly moved by the clear gospel presentation, but when it came time for the traditional “altar call”, Jilly hesitated. Seeing the situation, one of her leaders said, “Unless you go down the front and publically give your heart to Jesus and sign the “decision card”, you can’t be saved!” If you had been Jilly’s leader, would you have perhaps put that differently?

Question 7

This incident in Athens takes place during Paul’s second missionary journey, and shows Paul’s dedication to the task entrusted to him. What would you say to the person who claims that the work of global mission is now finished?

Operation World


One of the very helpful tools for taking an earnest interest in world mission is the valuable resource (once in paper print, but now only in digital format,) called Operation World.

www.operationworld.org



Have someone in the group access the website or download the app and present a quick overview of the country of Greece.

Note the suggested points for prayer, and also note the following observation about church attendance in Greece from another prayer agency:



The Greek Orthodox Church is the official church of Greece, and the strong force that perpetuated the Greek culture and language during the long Ottoman rule. It continues to be a significant part of the cultural identity of the nation and receives state funding. Most of the population (98%) considers themselves to be Orthodox, but less than three percent attend any church regularly. Although laws have changed lessening discrimination for non-Orthodox believers, Protestants and Catholics often face problems if it is perceived they are drawing Greeks away from the Orthodox Church. But Evangelicals, both within and outside the Orthodox Church, are finding ways to reach the many who do not know the Gospel through service and other activities. (Prayercast).

In this regard, take also to heart this observation of veteran missionary RJ who said after recently taking a mission team to Greece: “Most Greeks will die without ever hearing a sermon.”

At the time when the persecution of Christians in China was at its height, China Inland Mission worker (now OMF), Frank Houghton, penned the following hymn that has stirred the hearts of many. Read and reflect on his words.

1. Facing a task unfinished
That drives us to our knees
A need that, undiminished,
Rebukes our slothful ease
We, who rejoice to know Thee
Renew before Thy throne
The solemn pledge we owe Thee
To go and make Thee known.

2. Where other lords beside Thee
Hold their unhindered sway
Where forces that defied Thee
Defy Thee still today
With none to heed their crying
For life, and love, and light,
Unnumbered souls are dying
And pass in to the night.

3. We bear the torch that flaming
Fell from the hands of those
Who gave their lives proclaiming
That Jesus died and rose
Ours is the same commission
The same glad message ours;
Fired by the same ambition
To Thee we yield our powers.

4. O Father who sustained them
O Spirit who inspired
Saviour, whose love constrained them
To toil with zeal untired.
From cowardice defend us
From lethargy awake!
Forth on Thine errands send us
To labour for Thy sake.

Prayer

Now finish in prayer, taking up the enormous spiritual needs of Athens, and asking God to make you more globally aware, and more jealous for His honour, and more burdened for the plight of those who will die without ever hearing of Jesus, and more confident in the power of the gospel to save anyone, anywhere, who will put their trust in Christ.