

BECOMING ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE  
ACTS 17:16-34

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

In 1955 Don Richardson was a Prairie Bible Institute student in Canada when he sensed the Lord directing him to become a missionary in the southwest Pacific. (PROJECTOR ON--- DON RICHARDSON) Five years later he married a student from the same school who had the same interest. In 1962 when Carol Richardson was pregnant with their first child, the family sailed for the Netherlands New Guinea. (NETHERLANDS NEW GUINEA)

After doing ministry with other missionaries the Richardsons were assigned to work with the Sawi tribe. It was a tough job. (DON RICHARDSON SAWI TRIBE) The place where they had to go was physically challenging. Don later wrote, **“Something in the mood of the place seemed to say mockingly, ‘I am not like your tame, manageable Canadian homeland. I am tangled. I am too dense to walk through. I am hot and steamy and drenched with rain. I am hip-deep mud and six-inch sago thorns. I am death adders and taipans and leeches and crocodiles. I am malaria and dysentery and filariasis and hepatitis.’”** (*Peace Child*, Don Richardson)

Then also the language of the Sawi was very difficult. Each verb had nineteen tenses. Then there was the minor problem that the Sawi tribe was one of only a few cultures in the world that combined cannibalism and headhunting, and also idealized treachery. (DON RICHARDSON SAWI TRIBE 02) Once the Richardsons learned the language well enough to present the gospel, they discovered that the people regarded Judas as the hero of the gospel story. The Sawi people exhibited this treachery in their bad treatment, sometimes killing, of people from other villages. The Richardsons were concerned that the people might decide to kill them and eat them. But their greatest challenge was to figure out how to reach these people with the gospel. How do you get to lost people who think that Judas Iscariot is a hero? The Richardsons got so frustrated that they announced their intention to leave their village. But then something unexpected happened. (PROJECTOR OFF)

If we are honest, most of us have not lost much sleep over concern about how to reach remote people in another part of the world with the gospel. But many of us have wondered how to reach family members, coworkers, neighbors, and friends who have little interest in spiritual things with the message of the gospel. How can we help them understand the importance of such a decision?

We have seen from our study of the Book of Acts that Jesus had commanded His followers to be witnesses for Him beginning in Jerusalem and reaching eventually to the remotest parts of the earth. We have seen how this message spread from Jews to

Samaritans to Gentiles. We have seen how it went from Jerusalem to Samaria to Antioch to Asia Minor to Europe.

(PROJECTOR ON--- SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY) Last week we left off with the Apostle Paul in the midst of his second missionary trip. He had both a positive and a negative response to the gospel in Thessalonica and Berea. In each city he went first to the synagogue and preached there until he was kicked out. Then he also preached to the Gentiles. Some Jews and Gentiles responded to his message. Some did not. We left off last week with Christians from Berea taking Paul away to Athens so that he wouldn't be hurt or killed by Jewish agitators who were causing trouble in Berea.

I.

So let's look at the Apostle Paul's experience in Athens. First we are going to examine vv. 16-22 of Acts #17 and consider the subject of THE NEED TO GO WHERE THE LOST ARE. (I. THE NEED TO GO WHERE THE LOST ARE) According to v. 16 Paul was waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him in Athens. The impression the text gives us is that either he wasn't planning to have a major evangelism outreach there, or he was waiting for his partners to show up before beginning a major evangelism campaign.

(ANCIENT ATHENS) Athens had been the cultural center of the world for several centuries. [This is Athens with the Acropolis containing the Parthenon in the background.] The military and political power of Athens had declined with the death of Alexander the Great 350 years earlier. But Athens' educational, artistic, and religious influence remained for much longer. Rome conquered the entire Mediterranean region. But it was Greek that was the most commonly spoken language throughout the empire. Thus it was Greek that was the language in which the New Testament was written. It was also the Greek gods that the Romans adopted and gave Latin names, and it was Greek, not Roman, art and literature that was studied and imitated.

Athens had perhaps only 10,000 people at this time. But it was still the cultural capital of the world. As our text notes, it was filled with idols and altars and temples. (ATHENS IDOLS) The Greeks had perhaps as many as 30,000 gods, and most of them were represented in some way in Athens. One ancient writer says that it was easier to find a god in this city than a man. All of this false religion was provoking to Paul. It bothered him. Evangelist that he was, he couldn't wait for the rest of his team to show up. There were a lot of spiritually lost people around. So he started preaching and teaching and reasoning. (PROJECTOR OFF)

On the Sabbath he talked in the synagogue. It doesn't seem that he got much of a response there. Being that these were Athenian Jews, perhaps they were less religious than the Jews in Berea and Thessalonica. Perhaps they were also more educated. According to the Pew Research Center, **"Looking at the U.S. public as a whole... the answer to the question of whether more education is correlated with less religion appears to be yes."** (Pew Research Center, April 26, 2017) Perhaps that should not surprise us. For when human judgment and reason become the center of dependence

and faith, God is removed from the central core of people's lives. Reason and man's judgment become enthroned.

Paul also preached in the marketplace, the Agora. (ATHENS AGORA) In Paul's day it contained public buildings, temples, and shops. Public discussions in this place were common. So it was appropriate that Paul took up his teaching and evangelism somewhere in the Agora. He went where it was most likely to reach lost people. He found them in the synagogue and in the marketplace.

Verse 18 indicates that Paul got into discussions with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. The Epicureans were named after the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who lived around 300 BC. (EPICURUS) They believed that God, or the gods, had created the world and then let it go without having any more involvement. Today we might call that Deism. Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were famous Deists.

The goal of life for Epicureans was to avoid pain, worry, fear, and death, and to pursue pleasure. One of their philosophers was a guy by the name of Diogenes. He wrote, **“Nothing to fear in God; Nothing to feel in death; Good [pleasure] can be attained; Evil [pain] may be endured.”** (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10:1-21) Everything is material, and death is the end of existence. So eat, drink, and be merry; for tomorrow you may die. The Epicureans would have been the scientific evolutionists of today. The hard drinking, drug taking, women chasing crowd of our society would have also felt very comfortable with their philosophy.

The other philosophic group which Paul encountered was the Stoics, who were pantheists. (ZENO) A philosopher by the name of Zeno, who also lived around 300 BC, is regarded as the founder of this school of thinking. The Stoics believed that everything is part of God. If the Epicureans believed that all is matter, the Stoics believed that all is spirit, or god. At death the soul of an individual reunites with the great world force. So we ought to endure life, they said. We should seek to live harmoniously with nature. Don't get too upset. Don't get too excited. Because everything has a common source in God, the Stoics believed that national and class distinctions should be removed.

Many of the Athenians didn't really buy this philosophy because they were convinced that they had a superior origin to that of other people. They were created specially by the Greek gods. The Stoic stress on harmonious living with nature and being connected to the life force of the world would be compatible with the philosophy of many environmentalists and New Agers of today. (PROJECTOR OFF)

These Greek philosophers, after listening to Paul, called him “a babblers.” The Greek word literally meant “seed picker.” The philosophers were accusing Paul of being a guy who picked up scraps of philosophy here and there, but who wasn't a real philosopher. He wasn't truly a scholar.

That attitude is reflective of the way that the educational elite tends to look at evangelical Christians today. We are often viewed as anti-science and anti-education.

Scholars Aryeh Weinberg and Gary Tobin in their work *Profiles of the American University* say that American college faculty **“feel less positively about Evangelicals than about any other religious group.”**

The Greek philosophers in our story also commented that this Paul was talking about some strange deities. They may have misunderstood Paul to be saying that resurrection was some kind of god along with this Jesus character. For the Greeks also had altars in Athens to qualities like virtue and reason and love and peace. Some of the Greeks treated these impersonal qualities like gods. So Paul's talk about resurrection may have prompted some of these philosophers to think that Paul was regarding resurrection as a god.

In vv. 19 & 20 we are told that these philosophers brought Paul to the Areopagus. Areopagus literally means “Court of Ares,” the Greek god of war. Originally this council met on Mars Hill, Mars being the Latin name for Ares. But in Paul's day it seems to have met in a building next to the Agora. (PROJECTOR ON--- STOA BASILEIOS) The building was known as the Stoa Basileios, or Royal Stoa.

The Areopagus seems to have functioned something like a city council. The Romans had reduced its authority from what it once was. But in Paul's day it was still the chief judicial body of Athens. In fact the supreme court of Greece today is called the Areopagus. This council also had jurisdiction over religion and education. From other references in Greek literature it seems that the Areopagus issued licenses to some people so that they could teach. Whether denial of such a license meant that they could not teach in Athens, or just that they just would have fewer privileges and rights is uncertain. But it may well be that this authority to license public teachers was part of the reason that Paul was brought before the Areopagus.

Luke adds in v. 21 that this council and many of the people of Athens just liked to listen to new ideas. He says, **“Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.”** This criticism is also echoed in Greek literature. The Athenians were known to be prideful about their grasp of philosophy and education. They thought that Athens was the center of the world. People in Macedon, from which region Paul had just come, resented this idea. Our author Luke was probably from Philippi in Macedon. That probability may also be reflected in his comment in v. 21.

So it was here in the meeting place of the Areopagus that Paul explained the gospel to the Greek philosophers and civic leaders. (PROJECTOR OFF) Paul's mission was to bring the gospel wherever he found spiritually lost people who needed to hear it. Sometimes that meant preaching in the synagogue. Sometimes it meant talking to people who would listen in the marketplace. Sometimes it meant speaking to religious people. Sometimes it meant talking to jailers. Sometimes it meant speaking to uneducated idol worshippers. Sometimes it meant speaking to the secular intellectuals.

Many of us get tired of being surrounded by people who are spiritually lost. Occasionally we need to be reminded that a key part of our job as Christians is going where lost people are. We have been commanded to be witnesses for Jesus to people who don't know Him. For Don Richardson going to lost people meant going to the Netherlands New Guinea. For our church-sponsored missionaries it means going to Asia and Brazil and Belgium and Mexico and the local jails. For us it may mean reaching out to our neighbors or coworkers. Maybe the Spirit would prompt some of you to go with Rob to the nursing homes next Saturday. We Christians need to cultivate relationships with unbelievers. We need to go where lost people are.

II.

In vv. 22-31 then we learn about THE NEED TO ADAPT OUR MESSAGE TO THE AUDIENCE. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE NEED TO ADAPT...) By that I don't mean that we change what we believe, our doctrine. Instead this section teaches us that we vary our presentation of the gospel according to the people with whom we are dealing. We have seen Paul preach often in the synagogues. Luke has provided for us several abbreviated descriptions of the content of his gospel presentations to these audiences. We have seen that Paul used the Hebrew Bible as the basis of his presentation. He quoted it often and argued that Jesus met the qualifications described in the Bible for Israel's Messiah.

Luke has also made reference to Paul's preaching to the Gentiles. The verses in this section contain the first extended sample of the gospel presentation that Paul used with a Gentile audience. In this case it also happens to be an intellectual audience. The people in it were probably not familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures, and certainly they did not regard them as authoritative. Paul is thoroughly Biblical in what he says, but I want you to notice that Paul doesn't quote a single verse of Scripture here.

He begins his message to the Areopagus by looking for common ground. He looks for a point of contact and begins on a complimentary note. He says in v. 22, "**Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.**" He goes on to mention an altar that he came across which was dedicated to an unknown god. According to ancient writers there were a number of altars in Athens dedicated to unknown gods. Archaeologists have not discovered any in Athens. (ALTAR TO UNKNOWN GOD) But they did find this altar in Rome that was dedicated to an unknown god.

According to an ancient Greek story there was a terrible plague in Athens in the sixth century BC. One of the town fathers drove a herd of sheep up to the Acropolis. There he just let them go wherever they chose to wander. Supposedly wherever a sheep seemed to stop, it was killed as a sacrifice. By this time there were already many idols and temples scattered around Athens. Wherever one of these sheep was killed, an altar would be built and dedicated to the idol or god that was closest to it. But some sheep were killed in places where there wasn't any temple or idol nearby. So in those places an altar was built and dedicated to an unknown god. According to the story when all of the sheep had been killed and sacrificed, the plague was stopped. (PROJECTOR OFF)

So Paul uses this public admission that there are gods that the Athenians don't know to talk about the God of the Bible. He begins with the Creation. The Athenians may not have known it, and Paul doesn't tell them, but that is where the Bible begins, isn't it? The Lord sometimes uses the created world to get people's attention.

Charles Colson once found his Marine battalion posted to a navy ship off the coast of Guatemala. On a hot, dark night he peered up at the sky studded with thousands of stars. He says, **"That night I suddenly became as certain as I had ever been about anything in my life that out there in that great starlit beyond was God. I was convinced that He ruled over the universe, that to Him there were no mysteries, that He somehow kept it all miraculously in order. In my own fumbling way, I prayed, knowing that He was there, questioning only whether He had time to hear me."** (Colson, *Born Again*)

Paul in our passage first argues that the powerful Creator God could not be limited to dwelling in temples. Many of the philosophers agreed with that. Then Paul reasoned in v. 25 that a God powerful enough to have created the world could not be dependent for His well-being upon what His creatures did for Him or provided for Him. Many of the pagan Greeks believed that their gods required service and gifts of food for their well-being. So Paul may have begun now to step on a few toes.

Then in v. 26 Paul said that all people were created by this one God. **"...he made from one man every nation of mankind..."** Contra the theory of evolution this is a claim that we all descend from Adam. The Stoics could buy the idea that God, or the gods, created all humans. He was still on common ground with them. But many of the Athenians were convinced that they were inherently different than other people. For they had an original creation that went back to the Greek gods.

Paul went on to say that this Creator God had determined the times and the geographical boundaries of the different nations. This was in contradiction of the view of the Epicureans who said that God, or the gods, only set things in motion and had no direct involvement after that. They said that all is chance, like many of the evolutionists of today. Paul argues that there is a sovereign Creator who does not work by chance.

Furthermore this God is not far from anyone. Many of the Greeks believed that the gods, though they had temples in Athens, had their permanent homes on Mt. Olympus. To find them and get to them could be a difficult and dangerous task.

Then in v. 28 Paul quotes from a Greek writer. Though he doesn't quote from the Bible, he is willing to take statements from Greek literature that support his Biblical message. A Greek poet by the name of Epimenides said in a poem to one of the gods, **"But you are not dead; you live and abide forever, For in you we live and move and have our being."** After Paul cites that line, he quotes another Greek writer whose name is Aratus, who happens to have been from the province of Cilicia in Asia Minor, which was also the home territory of the apostle. This writer says, **"It is with Zeus [the chief of the Greek gods] that everyone of us in every way has to do, for we are also his**

**offspring.”** Paul didn’t quote pagan poets like this when he was in the synagogue. You see, he was tailoring his message for the audience with which he was dealing.

Paul goes on in v. 29 to attack idol worship. Although he adapts his message to his audience, he also tells the truth. He contradicts wrong views about God. He says that it is silly to think that this Creator God is anything like images made of gold or silver or stone. He then concludes his message in vv. 30 & 31 by calling upon his listeners to repent, to acknowledge their false views of God and to turn to the true Creator God. They are to do this **“because He has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a Man whom He has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”**

Luke probably is giving us just an outline of Paul’s sermon. The apostle must have explained more about who Jesus was. But notice that he did get to Jesus. Notice also that he concluded with a reference to judgment. How does the Bible end? The last book of the Bible talks about judgment, doesn’t it. So although Paul doesn’t quote the Bible and he tailors his message to the audience, the whole story was there: Creation, Jesus, His death, His resurrection, judgment.

(PROJECTOR ON--- 1 CORINTHIANS 9:20) In 1 Corinthians #9 Paul said, **“To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. (1 CORINTHIANS 9:21) To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. (1 CORINTHIANS 9:22) To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.”** Our story this morning is an illustration of this concept that Paul taught in 1 Corinthians. He went to lost people where they were, and he adapted his message so that it would have the maximum impact upon the hearers.  
(PROJECTOR OFF)

We also need to tune in to where our unsaved audience is at so that we can present the gospel in the most effective way to them. The Richardsons had become frustrated and hopeless in their effort to bring the gospel to their audience. But when the Sawi people heard that they were planning to leave one of their villages, they had a big tribal meeting. It seems that the Sawis had no intention of killing and eating the Richardsons. But some of the villages had been attacking and killing each other, to the frustration of the Christian missionaries. So at this tribal meeting they decided to make peace with each other.

The Richardsons watched in amazement as the process unfolded. Though rarely used, the Sawi diplomatic procedure required that a small child from each of the warring villages be given to each of the other warring villages. (PROJECTOR ON--- PEACE CHILD) As long as any of those children lived in their new villages, the peace would continue. It was a heart wrenching experience to see some of the men give their children to people from other villages. But it was the first sign of trust that the

Richardsons had seen in the attitude of the villages to one another. Every demonstration of friendship among the Sawi people was suspect except one. If a man would actually give his own son to his enemies, that man could be trusted. Though treachery was valued among the Sawi, anyone who would harm a peace child was the most evil and terrible of people.

From that discovery of this cultural practice of the Sawis the Richardsons learned the way to adapt the message to their audience. (PEACE CHILD BOOK) They now described Jesus as the peace child who had been sent by a loving God to warring human beings who fought against Him. When Judas was described as the one who betrayed the peace child, he was no longer a hero. The Sawi people recognized him as the villain. They soon began to turn to this Jesus in faith. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In dealing with individual unbelievers we Christians would sometimes be more effective if we gave more attention to understanding where our friends are at and tailoring our approach accordingly. Some of us may have Jewish friends and acquaintances. Perhaps we need to understand the Jewish feast days a little better. Many of us have LDS friends and relatives. Perhaps we would do well to learn more about their beliefs. Perhaps it would be useful to skim through the Book of Mormon to better understand where they are coming from.

Some of us have friends who are into astrology and horoscopes. Maybe these are the kinds of people who always buy *The National Inquirer* at the end of the year to find out what the supposed prophets predict for the next year. Perhaps a good book on Biblical prophecy would catch their attention.

Maybe you have a friend who would never darken the door of a church. But that person just loves music, and all kinds of music. Maybe that person would go with you to a quality Christian concert. Some people aren't spiritually inclined, but they are do-gooders. Maybe they would bake some cookies for our Christmas outreach to juvenile corrections. If we tune in to where our audience is at, perhaps we can be more effective in bringing the gospel to them.

III.

Finally in vv. 32-34 let's consider THE RESPONSE. (III. PROJECTOR ON--- THE RESPONSE) Luke writes, **"Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' 33 So Paul went out from their midst. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them."**

Apparently there wasn't any formal judgment rendered upon Paul's teaching. If the issue was whether Paul should be given a license to teach, it would appear that a final decision on that matter was postponed. But it was obvious that he didn't have a real responsive group. Resurrection from the dead was not a concept that the Greeks had in

their theology or philosophies. A famous Greek writer by the name of Aeschylus had the sun God Apollo say this in one of his works: **“When the dust has soaked up a man’s blood, once he is dead, there is no resurrection.”**

The response that Paul got to the gospel is typical of the response that the gospel always gets. Some mocked. Some were unsure. And some believed, although there were fewer who responded positively than in the other communities where Paul preached. One of the respondents was Dionysius, who is called an Areopagite, which means that he must have been a member of this council. There were a few others. But the impression the text gives us is that Athens was less responsive than the other towns where he had preached.

Paul went where the lost people were, and he adapted his message to the audience. But it was still a tough crowd. Intellectuals are often a hard group to penetrate. For pride is a difficult thing to overcome. Jesus Himself had the most difficult time with the scribes and the Pharisees. They were the intellectuals of his audience and they were largely unresponsive to His message.

Paul went all over the Roman Empire preaching the gospel to lost people. In the course of his work he encountered all kinds of different audiences: Jews, Roman leaders, Greek philosophers, Gentile idol worshipers, angry mobs, fellow prisoners, jailers. He seems always to have adapted his method for the people with whom he was dealing. Then he left the response in God’s hands. We would do well to benefit from his example.

Most of us don’t need to go very far to find lost people. Perhaps some of us need to be reminded, though, that these people are our mission field. We have been commanded to be witnesses to them. Perhaps we know someone with kids who might come to our Fall Festival. As we seek to fulfill our Biblical responsibility, perhaps we should consider the possibility that we need to seek a different approach to reach them. I would like for us to close this part of our service by having us all bow our heads and ask the Lord to give us new ideas about how to reach one or two unbelievers around us whom we want to see come into a relationship with Christ. Let’s have that as our concern as we have a few moments of silent prayer.