



20. 'Engaging the culture'

Acts 17.¹⁶⁻³⁴

Background

Athens was one of the ancient world's great centres of civilisation, renowned for its architecture, art and academy: this was 'culture' in a heightened form – and, not least for that reason, Luke slows his narrative down a bit at this point to give a more detailed account of the way in which the apostle Paul was careful to engage with the 'culture' of the place.

It's an illuminating and informative narrative, and one which is singularly pertinent to the challenges and opportunities which we face here in these days. What does it mean to be out 'on the street', engaging at 'street-level' with a sophisticated but biblically illiterate society? And how do you go about it? The example of Paul recounted here provides us with answers!

His ministry in Athens was exercised by him in both the synagogue and the market-place: a 'side-by-side' ministry, as it were, in which he sought to build bridges into the minds and hearts of those who had a religious bent – and also into the thinking of those whose background and perspective were altogether different.

It's instructive to see how Paul went about the challenge of engaging with the people of Athens at 'street-level'.

First he 'observed' their life as a society, and was able to find a feature of it which was a 'self-confessed' chink in the 'armour' of their supposedly sophisticated culture: they were 'ignorant of the very thing you worship' (v.23).

He then set before them both the sovereignty and the grace of the God who made all things – using a quote from one of their own writers, rather than any Bible quote – before presenting the urgent summons of the gospel and speaking to them of the person of Jesus, the significance of His death and resurrection, and the certainty of a coming judgment.

The response of the people in Athens, too, is instructive. Some quick to scorn, others glad to trust, and still others needing more time: a reminder that for many (in Aberdeen as in Athens) the gospel message is so totally new that they need some time and space to get their heads round it.

Read it all! '**Days**' (1), (4) & (5) are the ones with which to start in this study.

1) Monday 17th July – burdened by the barrenness

Read [Acts 17.16-17](#)

“.. he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols ..” (Acts 17.16)

Athens’ architectural and academic excellence was matched by its spiritual darkness. Paul saw only the idol worship which permeated the people’s life. He was out on the street with the message of Jesus, burdened by their need and engaging with them all.

What would you say are the ‘idols’ in the cities of our western world today?

Are you ‘distressed’ by the abundance of such ‘idols’ – and does that lead you to share the gospel with others?

What are the ‘market-places’ where you are regularly meeting ‘those who happen to be there’?

How ready are you to engage with them in conversation, and how easy do you find it to speak to them of the Lord?

Prayer: How far we have strayed from Yourself, O Lord. The dearest idol I have known, whate’er that idol be, help me to tear it from Thy throne and worship only Thee.

2) Tuesday 18th July – Jesus and the resurrection

Read [Acts 17.18](#)

“.. Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection ..” (Acts 17.18)

Paul’s message centred on a person (Jesus) and an event (His death and resurrection): it was too simple for some, too strange for others. The one eternal God had broken into history in the person of His Son and had done things which changed everything.

Does the fear of what others may think of you keep you from speaking to people about Jesus and the resurrection?

People happily debate abstract, philosophical questions (suffering and a God of love? etc): how can you use such discussions to speak of the good news?

Prayer: Teach me what to say, my God, when others raise objections to the good news of your Son. Help me to seek not to win the debate but to commend the Lord Jesus.

3) Wednesday 19th July – a classic ‘post-truth’ culture

Read [Acts 17.19-21](#)

“.. doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas ..” (Acts 17.20)

Luke's telling statement tells you everything about a culture which, for all its seeming sophistication, had lost its way. Simply tossing around ideas, the stranger sometimes the better. But *doing* nothing. Going nowhere, other than round in endless circles.

To what extent has our society become one in which, like Athens of old, we are *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (to quote the title of [a famous book](#))?

What are the 'latest ideas' today with which our society is fascinated?

Prayer: *Oh that You would rend the heavens and come down, O Lord: come down to make Your name known to Your enemies, that the nations may quake before You!*

4) Thursday 20th July – darkened in their understanding

Read [Acts 17.22-23](#)

".. you are ignorant of the very thing you worship .." (Acts 17.23)

No amount of religion could paper over the cracks of the Athenians' basic ignorance. God must reveal Himself and open the eyes of the blind, if we are ever to know Him. And He will use the preaching of the gospel to that end, whatever the context may be.

What might Paul have seen as evidence of the felt needs which our society has, the points at which we today can 'scratch where our society itches'?

Paul was able to identify key characteristics of Athenian culture and society: what would you identify as the key characteristics of our society today?

How 'culturally observant' are you?

How will it help you in sharing the gospel to be familiar with what makes our culture 'tick'?

What steps might you take to be more aware of the cultural trends in society today?

Prayer: *Lord, help me to keep my eyes and ears open, discerning the needs which others have and knowing how best to respond to those needs with grace and truth.*

5) Friday 21st July – great is the gospel of our God!

Read [Acts 17.24-28](#)

".. He Himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else .." (Acts 17.25)

Grace lies at the heart of the gospel as Paul expounds it here. God the one who makes it happen. God the one who comes to serve (and not Himself to *be* served). And God the one who alone gives life. Who He is, and what He does, and why He matters!

What were the main points which Paul was making in these verses here?

How would you expound the gospel to a friend from v.25?

Why are the times in which, and the place where, a person lives, significant in prompting him or her to seek after God and to reach out for Him?

Paul quotes one of their poets: how important is it to be familiar with, and discerning about, the literature, music and 'art' of contemporary society?

Prayer: How glad I am that You are seeking a people of worship and praise; and that You have so ordered all things that we should thus seek after and find Yourself.

6) Saturday 22nd July – the need for a penitent faith

Read [Acts 17.29-31](#)

".. now He commands all people everywhere to repent .." (Acts 17.30)

Grace isn't cheap, for a death must be died if sin is now to be forgiven – the death that Jesus died, the sufficiency of which is proved now by the fact that He's been raised. And mercy isn't all there is to know about the Lord: He's just – and judgment's coming.

Why is it important to present the gospel summons in terms of a *command* rather than an *invitation*?

How are the mercy of God and the justice of God displayed in the death and resurrection of Jesus and in certainty of a coming final judgment?

Prayer: How deep Your Father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure, that You should give Your only Son to make this wretch a treasure! Help me live for Your glory!

7) Sunday 23rd July – a mixed reception

Read [Acts 17.32-34](#)

".. some of the people became followers of Paul and believed .." (Acts 17.34)

The message met a very mixed reception. Some scornfully closing their minds. Some honestly needing more time. And some of them eagerly trusting the Saviour. Athens was really no different from anywhere else. How will the message be heard today?

What's the difference between a person saying they 'need more time' and a person simply 'sitting on the fence'?

How do you ensure that your patience in giving people more time doesn't detract from the urgency of the gospel summons?

Prayer: Lord, You have been so very patient with me, for like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, I have been so slow to learn! Help me today to be quick to heed Your Word!