

A Vital Relationship

Acts 17:22-31

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Acts 17 tells the story of a preacher who stands in the midst of a setting that is very impressive, indeed, in the midst of a setting that is almost overwhelming. The preacher is the Apostle Paul. The setting is the Areopagus. “There was a venerable court in Athens which had jurisdiction in matters of religion and morals.”¹ That court was the Areopagus, and it is believed to have stood with the other stunning works of architecture which rest so majestically on the Acropolis high above Athens, Greece. Among those buildings is the Parthenon, captured in numerous stunning photos displaying the amazing architecture of Ancient Greece. F. F. Bruce describes the Parthenon in particular, but he could well be describing all the buildings of the Acropolis as “One of the most visually satisfying buildings to be seen anywhere in the world.”²

In Acts 17, standing before a court that had jurisdiction in matters of religion and morals, standing in the shadow of architecture that testified to the skill of human engineering and architecture that was often dedicated and devoted to the numerous Greek and Roman gods, standing before the Areopagus, Paul said to the august gathering, “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 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.” (Acts 17:22,23)

There is great boldness in the preaching of the Apostle Paul at the Areopagus, or what is also known as Mars Hill. Paul admits that the Athenians are very religious. The signs of their very religious life are impressive, statues and temples made of marble and gold. But Paul stands before these very religious Athenians who, “Spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas” and proclaims to them that what they worship as an Unknown God, well, he is there at that very moment to make that Unknown God known to them. We do not know everything Paul said that day as he stood in the Areopagus, as he stood in the shadow of the Parthenon, but we do know that Paul’s appeal was based on Jesus. Paul refers to Jesus as the man God appointed, and the proof that Jesus was God’s appointed and anointed man is that Jesus was raised from the dead. (Acts 17:31) I say we do not know everything Paul said that day at the Areopagus because what is recorded in Acts 17 does not mention the crucifixion. And yet at some point Paul must have mentioned the crucifixion, or else the resurrection which he does proclaim would make no sense.

¹ F.F. Bruce, *In the Steps of the Apostle Paul*, p. 39.

² Bruce, p. 36.

There is great boldness in the preaching of the Apostle Paul at the Areopagus. The bold preaching of Paul in Athens is not the only incident of bold preaching that we find in the Book of Acts. Peter, that cowardly disciple who denied Jesus three times is emboldened on the day of Pentecost and he stands up and preaches to a great crowd who gathered in response to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. Peter again preaches boldly when he stands before the religious leaders, the Sanhedrin. Stephen preaches boldly when opposition to the early church arose and people began to argue with him. Paul carries on that tradition of boldness as he travels first with Barnabas and later Silas and Timothy and others, including the good old Doctor Luke who has written for us the gospel that bears his name and the accounts that make up the Acts of the Apostles.

These bold accounts of bold preachers who boldly proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ are almost certainly intended to call us, ones who follow Jesus Christ, to boldly proclaim the gospel in the world in which we live. And who wouldn't feel emboldened to preach when you hear that Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost led to 3,000 baptisms and conversions? Give me that Pentecost Pulpit and I'll give you some bold preaching. Perhaps, but remember when Peter boldly preached before the Sanhedrin his reception was not quite as warm as on the Day of Pentecost. The Sanhedrin threatened him at first, causing Peter and the others to pray that God would give his servants the boldness to continue preaching. This led to a second appearance before the Sanhedrin in which Peter ended up being flogged.

Stephen preached boldly and that experience ended badly for him. He was stoned to death by an angry mob. It doesn't get much worse than that, being put to death because of your bold preaching. Some young religious zealot stood by that day and took great pleasure in seeing Stephen's bold preaching meet such a disastrous end. The young man's name was Saul.

Still, there is something we have to take into account concerning bold preaching. You cannot measure the effect of bold preaching only by what happens immediately. Yes, Stephen preached boldly about Christ and yes, he was put to death. Yes, his death was followed by a great persecution against the whole church in Jerusalem. Yes, many believers scattered, leaving the Holy City, apparently afraid for their lives. But one who scattered used the persecution as an opportunity to carry on the bold preaching. His name was Philip. Philip preached to a Samaritan village. Many Samaritans were converted to the gospel. Philip was whisked away from the Samaritan village. He met an Ethiopian eunuch heading back to Africa. Philip baptized that Ethiopian eunuch and all the sudden what seemed like a dead end for Stephen's preaching became a lifeline for Samaritans and Africans to receive the good news of the gospel.

And that young man named Saul who stood by approvingly when Stephen died? Ah yes, Saul got his life turned upside down as he traveled on the road to Damascus. Saul was blinded by the light of Christ. Saul experienced the new creation that comes from having Jesus Christ forgive your sins, fill your heart, and fire your spirit with the passion of the gospel. And somewhere along the way Saul, later known as Paul, stood in the halls of the Areopagus, in the shadow of the Parthenon, high above the glorious city of Athens on what is known as the Acropolis, taking in all the very religious things that made up life for the Greeks and the Romans, and instead of talking about very religious things, Paul proclaimed that humans can have a vital relationship with the living God. That vital relationship comes through Jesus Christ.

There is no guarantee when we preach boldly that the results will be like Pentecost. At the same time bold preaching normally does not yield the results Stephen experienced. When Paul preached in Athens, we are told some sneered while others said, "Let's talk more about this." My guess is many preachers have the same experience as me, which is that we never really know what difference it makes. Most sermons and proclamations and testimonies are one strand in a long cord of faith that is woven over many years. Often, we never really learn about how our part in the strand plays out. And yet there are some moments when God allows us the great joy of learning how we were involved in helping someone experience a vital relationship with Jesus Christ.

A group of people from our former church were on a retreat. During the retreat a woman named Susan asked the group to pray for her husband Trevor. She told how Trevor was not a believer. She told how his scientific mind played a role in keeping him from believing, and how she longed for him to know the love of Jesus Christ. Susan wanted her husband Trevor to believe in God in a personal and intimate way. Susan wanted her husband Trevor to experience the joy of a vital relationship with Jesus Christ. She said, "Trevor told me he is going to church tomorrow while we are away on retreat. I pray God touches his heart." The group gathered and prayed.

Trevor showed up for worship that Sunday while the group was away on retreat. I was glad to see Trevor, knowing full well his wife had said he did not believe in Jesus Christ. I greeted Trevor as he entered our worship service. I was preaching from Mark 8, and the passage included two stories. One was about Jesus feeding 4,000 people with just seven loaves and few small fish. This feeding happened right after Jesus had fed 5,000 people in Mark chapter 6. After Jesus fed the 4,000, which was after Jesus fed the 5,000, the disciples get worried because they are in a boat with Jesus and they only have one loaf of bread between the twelve of them. They are worried about whether they have enough bread. Jesus has just fed 5,000 and 4,000 with just a few loaves of bread. Jesus throws up his hands and says, "Do you still not understand?"

Well that morning, as I preached through that particular passage, I kept using the phrase, “Do you get it?” Do we get it, that God loves us and God will provide for us and that to go even a bit further with the image Jesus is in the boat with us...do we get it? Do you get it? I guess I got revved up bit that morning because this stuff really matters. And I guess I asked the question quite a few times that day, because that question really does matters. Do you get it?

After the service I had calmed down when Trevor came walking out the door. In all the excitement of preaching I had forgotten about Trevor. I had forgotten about the group that was away on retreat. I had forgotten the prayers Susan and the group were praying for Trevor. Trevor came out the door at the end of worship with a big smile on his face. I shook his hand and started to move on toward the next person. Trevor held on to my hand. He didn't let go. His face was beaming. He looked me in the eye and said, “I get it.” I nodded my head with a blank expression. It took me a second...actually, it took me more than a second. I didn't get it at that point. He said, “You asked this morning if we get it, and I get it. I get it.” We live for moments like that. In the grace and mystery of God, Trevor had come to know Christ. Trevor was about to enter into a vital relationship with Jesus Christ.

That was in the February of 2002. A few years later I received an email from Susan, Trevor's wife. This is what it said:

Hi, Wayne:

Trevor has terminal cancer. The doctors think he only has months to live. I am putting together a testimony of Trevor's walk with the Lord and wondered whether you would have a copy of the sermon you preached on Sunday, 24 February 2002. It was titled "Do You Get It?"

I found the sermon and sent it to her. After receiving my sermon, Susan wrote,

Hi, Wayne:

Thank you so much for locating and sending the sermon. It brought back so many wonderful memories of that wonderful weekend retreat. As a result of answered prayers that we prayed that weekend, Trevor has not been the same.... he was forever ruined for the ordinary.

Although Trevor's health is failing, his faith grows stronger day by day. I was reading your sermon again and reflecting on how God has provided during Trev's illness. Every time Trev had to visit the chemo ward for treatment, we would pray that God would bring people to us that needed the love and encouragement of God in their life at that particular time. Every time God was faithful to provide. People still come and visit Trevor at our home, and it's such a joy to see people growing in their faith as they observe Trevor going through this illness and having no doubts or fears about his future.

We feel God's presence with us, and know we are not alone in this season.

Please pass on our love to our wonderful church family.

*Love and blessings,
Susan and Trevor*

Friends, you can take all the marble and gold and shrines and altars and make a pile that reaches to the moon, and all you will have is a pile of things that make you very religious. Or you can take hold of that cross, that old rugged cross, on which Jesus died, and from which he rose again from the dead, and you can reach out your hand to the one who died and who now lives forever and say, "Jesus, I want to know you as my Lord and Savior. Jesus Christ, come into my heart and let me experience the joy of a vital relationship with you." I guess what I'm asking you today is the same question I asked Trevor nearly twenty years ago. Do you get it? If you do get it, please let me know. I want to join with the angels in heaven who rejoice every time one of God's precious children find their way home into his arms of love.

Amen.