

Easter, April 24th, 2011

“Furnished Proof”

Acts 17.16-34

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols. ¹⁷ So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. ¹⁸ And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" Others, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,"-- because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming?" ²⁰ "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean." ²¹ (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.) ²² So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. ²³ "For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ "The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; ²⁵ nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; ²⁶ and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, ²⁷ that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸ for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' ²⁹ "Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. ³⁰ "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, ³¹ because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead." ³² Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this." ³³ So Paul went out of 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.

Today, we're looking at an ancient account (say 50 AD). It's about the very rapid growth of Christianity in the Roman Empire.

You may or may not recognize how culturally odd it is that we would sit together for an hour or so and sing and pray and then have someone read and then explain a passage of

literature from antiquity. There's a strong possibility that your neighbor is not doing this today.

My friend, Bill Iverson was born in Miami around 1930 (I suppose). His father was pastor of a large church. He told me that in those days, if you added the attendance of First Baptist Church of Miami and First Methodist and their church, Shenandoah Presbyterian Church – their total attendance on Easter Sunday was 1/3 of the whole population of Miami. (And that's not even counting all the other churches.)

I'm not pining for those days – I'm just noting that IT is NOT that WAY today. South Florida is for better and for worse a very different place; it would be silly or even tragic if the church failed to recognize and respond to this different situation. But here we are...still reading this ancient literature. Why?

Well, I'll jump right in and offer this rather direct, un-original outline for the sermon today:

1. What is this passage – generally speaking?
2. In this passage what's the objective of this character (esp. what he does and he says)?
3. Does this ancient passage SAY anything to modern/post-modern South Floridians?

FIRST, what are we reading? Well, the Book of Acts is a history of the first generation of Christians in the Roman Empire. It's the earliest written book of Christian Church History.

Early on, (end of chpt. 7) we meet a young, up and coming Jewish scholar named Saul of Tarsus (a college town in Southern Turkey). Saul was a zealot – a fundamentalist – and he saw this Jesus-movement as a threat to Jewish orthodoxy and he was working to eradicate it.

And while on a mission to arrest Christians, this young fanatic was knocked to the ground and claimed that he saw the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. And Saul (whose name was changed to Paul) became a believer in Jesus Christ and a member of the movement he was trying to destroy.

In time, Paul became a teacher and then a missionary sent out by the multi-racial church at Antioch (Syria) to spread the Christian message and start churches.

Paul HAD BEEN a Jewish separatist and a kind of doctrinal watchdog AGAINST Christianity and then became its greatest proponent.

And now Paul comes to Athens. It was not at its peak but it was still one of the intellectual centers of the ancient world. It was bored with itself and it was trendy... always looking for the new and the novel but also pretty convinced that there was nothing new and novel...same as it ever was...same as it ever was. It was not easy to impress the jaded minds who resided in Athens. AND it was a spiritual place. Chic snobbish...cynical and spiritual. (What could be worse?!)

And the Stoics and the Epicureans debated there – like the Republicans and Democrats!

Paul evidently knew about these philosophers – he'd grown up in a college town. But this is the first record we have of the Christian message in an intellectual/academic environment not influenced by the Old Testament. For the Athenians, their old testament was The Odyssey...and their prophets were Plato and Aristotle and Epicurus and Zeno.

Look at Paul's goal here in Athens – first his manner (what he does) and then his message (what he says): He starts by just...observing. He's apparently familiar with the Stoic poet Aratus...but he still has to see it for himself. Verse 16 "observing" ...verse 22, "I observe" ...verse 23 "examining...I found". He's intellectually inquisitive; he simply takes time to observe and to consider. He's emotional (v. 16 – "provoked within") but not fanatical; deliberate; passionate but not narrow-minded or wild-eyed. He "theorizes" – really looks and learns.

2nd – He dialogues – v.17 "reasoning in the synagogue and in the market place...with those who were there". That word "reasoning" is the Greek word "dialogue". He is speaking and listening and simply engaging whoever wants to talk. "Conversing" – v.18.

3rd – Paul is very, very respectful. He's willing to give them a lot – quotes their poets – he had read them and even memorized parts. He was culturally conversant and he is willing to see the good in things (even if they're not "Christian things"). He compliments them on how spiritual they are. He's somehow able to stand right in the aisle between the conservative Stoics and the liberal Epicureans and speak to them both...both groups

listen! Notice that Paul's speech came at their invitation...and when he does, he speaks with civility.

4th – Paul, for all his charm, is not a game-show host...It's not a mindless tolerance where every perspective is equally true (no matter how contradictory the positions prove to be). He recognizes points of contact but he doesn't try to ignore the profound differences in their beliefs.

They're interested in what's new and Paul has something new to share. And while I'm sure he wanted to be liked, that wasn't his goal. He speaks with genuine respect and compassion but also with that KIND of love that's willing to be unpopular for the good of the listener.

He has bold love – he's courageous not to blow off differences that are really very significant. At one point they call him a hack, a rookie (v. 18 "idle babblers" – "seed-picker" – a big insult! But he soldiers on!). Others say "No...I think he may actually have something new to say!" And Paul sticks around to make it clear – bold love.

So, HIS MANNER: observes, dialogues, respects, but (4th) he's not mindless and he is courageous and willing to be disliked.

Then the MESSAGE: he really shows courage when he gets to the content. They admit to not knowing certain key spiritual ideas (v.23 - He found an altar to an unknown god) and he boldly asserts that he is bringing the missing piece: he tells the story of the Unknown God.

He confronts their idolatry. All their spiritual commotion – which they were so proud of - is mostly just an attempt to control the Power that controls all things – their spirituality is an attempt to dominate God – that's the essence of idolatry and God does take it personally!

And he confronts their racism (vv. 25-29 they were all Athenian Supremacists!)

And then Paul basically ends with a bang – as if to say, "Look guys: we're all basically in the same boat! We're all ignorant – groping in the dark for the God we don't really want to find! And God is right in front of us!...But we won't open our eyes!"

“You’re Greeks. I’m Jewish but we’re all lost in ignorance – we tell ourselves that we’re looking for God but we’re only trying to control our worlds and build our little kingdoms. You try to control things by manipulating the powers through statues and philosophies and I tried to control God and other people by being more righteous and orthodox than everyone else ...but...we’re all manipulators and unknowing.”

“But NOW God has come to us and we can’t plead ignorance anymore. A Man came and He claimed to be the unique and only Incarnation of God Himself. That Man was killed and dead but God the Father raised Him from the dead. God furnished proof that this Man is the great dividing line for all people...So, repent, admit your culpable ignorance and your control lust – because if you give Him control, you will become free like you never imagined.

OR continue making your own meaning and making more and more idols – more ways to manage and manipulate and stay in the dark – and then you’ll stand before this Man at the end of history but you’ll be on the wrong side of the great divide.

When Paul mentioned history moving toward a goal – an end point – a forward progression – some of them choked because they believed history was an endless cycle – not a line but a circle. But when Paul mentioned the resurrection from the dead some sneered.

They understood what Paul meant: a totally dead Man came back to life. Paul did not believe it was a sort of spiritual resurrection or a moral symbol of man’s eventual triumph. He believed something that was truly NEW! He was saying that a man was dead and came back to new and indestructible life.

Death could not hold Him. Paul presented it as a historical fact. They could have dealt with a symbol or a metaphorical teaching...that’s not what Paul meant. He meant that Jesus of Nazareth was the only truly righteous and sinless Man and God the Father raised Him from the dead (physically, literally, historically, miraculously) to show that the sacrifice of His life/death was acceptable.

God furnished proof, that everyone whom Jesus Christ represented in His life and death – i.e. everyone who repents and trusts Him will also share in His triumph. This will be the basis for the judgment of the world.

Now – this was a sort-of plain telling of this story but what does it mean to a post-Modern person living in South Florida?

Well, let me say a word to those who believe the in the resurrection of Jesus Christ AND a word to those who don't or who just aren't sure:

1. To those who don't believe or who aren't sure. You are in some sense, like the Athenians. I've never met anyone who says, "I know with absolute certainty that Jesus Christ did not physically rise from the dead!" I think what you mean is, you don't believe it...or just don't know.

Now, you may meet someone (maybe a professor in a religion class ...or some clergyman) who will tell you, it doesn't matter.

"Probably the very first Christians stole the body – were so convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah and then He got rejected and executed and His followers couldn't part with the dream – so they stole the Body and tried to keep hope alive."

But why didn't they recant when they all got in trouble for it. When all but one were executed and given the opportunity, "Just take us to the Body and you'll be free!" Why didn't anyone do that? WHO IS WILLING TO DIE FOR A HOAX? (No one!)

"Well... it was group hypnosis... they wanted it so badly and believed it so much... that they willed their rationality away."

Well, if you read the accounts you'll find – in a way that must have been embarrassing to this first generation of leaders – they almost all did not believe it was going to happen (surprised!).

To have "wish-fulfillment", you have to start with a wish! And it wasn't their belief – they stubbornly denied that Jesus Christ would rise. Some Jews believed in a resurrection at the end of time and some Greeks believed in a kind of rebirth like reincarnation – but virtually no one (including the disciples) believed a dead man could come back to life and become immune to death.

"Well, it was a symbol... My professor told me the early Christians knew Jesus Christ was in a tomb but they believed He rose spiritually."

Really? Because that's not what the Athenians heard from Paul. If they had, they would have been into it... but as it was, they sneered (but some wanted to know more and some believed this news – finally something really new... and true!)

Any way you slice the pie – the best way to account for the founding of the Christian Church is that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead. God furnished proof.

Yeah, but if that's the case... and I believe that... what else will I have to believe?

Just start there. If that's true – just follow through with the implications. Just ask the hard questions. Let a thinker who believes in the resurrection help you. We keep some books on the shelves – strike when the iron is hot – invest a little time and effort.

Now to those who do believe: We owe it to the world to become like Paul. To be observers of this mission field where God has planted us. It's not 1930 anymore. We hold to the resurrection because it's true and let's be courageous and say that. Let's keep reading these ancient texts because they're as true today as they were when first written.

BUT let's also read the newspaper, or the blogs, books, movies and stay respectful and culturally conversant. Let's respect people enough to dialogue, to listen and communicate.

And maybe some of our friends don't believe because that's just how they were raised (they never looked at the arguments in favor of the resurrection) but MAYBE some people here today DO believe only because your parents told you to believe.

Hey, be grateful for that... but you gotta make it your own. Maybe you should read those books too!

In any case, let's engage our young people and this new generation...let's observe, respect, dialogue and love boldly with the truth.