

26. Too smart to understand the truth?

February 2, 2014

It all started with a conflict between an antagonistic professor and one brave student at Florida Atlantic University in March, 2013. Ryan Rotela was told by his professor to write Jesus Christ's name on a piece of paper and stomp on it. Rotela refused. In retaliation, a formal disciplinary action was started against him.

But, before the system could roll over Rotela, the word about what was happening to the student got out, Christians across America became outraged, and suddenly the university's tune quickly changed. FAU's Senior Vice President for Student Affairs, Dr. Charles Brown, has since issued a formal apology. Next thing you know, the disciplinary action against the student was waved off.

Professor Deandre Poole has been put on administrative leave following a public response that included complaints from the Governor of Florida, Rick Scott.

Our Christian students in universities and colleges across America are targeted and ridiculed by their professors, fellow students, and administrators because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Only handful of those students who have courage and biblical truth in their hearts firmly can stand up for their faith in God against this onslaught from the ones who oppose them.

Why are many professors, students, and administrators hostile against Christianity? They never pick on any other religion, especially Islam, because they know that they will be killed by some muslim fanatics. In addition to the spiritual warfare in behind-the-scene, for these self-assessed smart people like the Greek people in ancient Athens whom apostle Paul confronted, Christianity is nothing more than foolishness.

1 Corinthians 1:23 but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness

This morning we are going to witness how apostle Paul is evangelizing to these Athens eggheads, like Urkel, and learn how to witness to those who think they have everything together.

A. PAUL: A MAN OF COURAGE

Acts 17:16-21 Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. 17 Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. 18 Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babblers want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection. 19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? 20 For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean." 21 For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

Athens had been home to Socrates, Plato, Aristotle – the great ancient philosophers. The glory of its politics and commerce had long since faded, but it was still a cultured and educated city that was proud of its history. It was considered as the intellectual

capital of the Greco-Roman world and, at the same time, the religious capital of Greece.

My first encounter with the Greek mythology was at my fine art college. Being a sculpture department student led me to see many of Greek god statues. The Greek mythology/religion was a mere deification of human attributes and the powers of nature. According to the Greek mythology, these Greek gods and goddesses had their own rivalries and ambitions, acted more like spoiled rotten humans than gods, much like Justin Bieber; and there were plenty of deities to choose from. Someone said, "In Athens it was easier to find a god than a man."

We today admire Greek sculpture and architecture as beautiful works of art, but in Paul's day, much of this was directly associated with their religion. Paul knew that idolatry was demonic. With all of their culture and knowledge, the Greeks did not know the true God.

Since they all had slaves to do their work, the free citizens of Athens did not have anything better to do except idly shopping for the newest fashions from Amarni, Louis Vuitton, Dolce, and, of course, Coach stores and talk about the latest philosophies.

The person who chases the new and ignores the old soon discovers that he has no deep roots to nourish his life. He also discovers that nothing is really new; it 's just that our memories are bad. All who agree with me, say, "Amen."

Paul had to confront two opposing philosophies as he witnessed in Athens, those of the Epicureans and the Stoics:

1) Epicureans – These people were materialists and practically atheists. And their goal in life was physical pleasure including a life of refined serenity, free from pain and anxiety. They considered death as the ultimate finality.

2) Stoics – These people were pantheists. In other words, they believed that every thing was god, and god was in everything. To them, the most important thing in life was to follow one's reason and be self-sufficient, of course, which led to pride and did not need the help of God.

To these philosophers, they were familiar with Zeus, but they didn't know anything about Jesus and His resurrection.

B. ON THE AREOPAGUS

Acts 17:22-23a Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; 23 for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship,

The Council of the Areopagus, sometimes called "Mars Hill" after the Roman god of war, 'Mars', was responsible to watch over both religion and education in the city, so it was natural for them to investigate the "new doctrine" Paul was teaching.

When Paul said that the people of Athens were religious, he didn't mean it in a positive way. Religion can lead one away from God, especially when a person trusts in a false religion. It gives very little credit to that person of being religious.

C. FIVE FACTORS FOR CLEAR COMMUNICATION

Acts 17:23b (1) I even found an altar with this inscription: T O THE UNKNOWN GOD. (2) Therefore, the One whom you worship without know-

ing, Him I proclaim to you: 24 (3) God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. 25 Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. 26 And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, 27 so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that 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 have our being, (4) as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' (5) 29 Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. 30 Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, 31 because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."

Athens was filled with statues dedicated 'To the Unknown God'. Six hundred years before Paul, a terrible plague came on the city and one philosopher had an idea. He let loose a flock of sheep through the town, and wherever they lay down, they sacrificed that sheep to the god that had the nearest shrine or temple. If a sheep lay down near no shrine or temple, they sacrificed the sheep 'To the Unknown God'.

I find the five factors that we should take heed as we communicate our faith with others:

1) Paul started where they were – Acts 17:23b

He didn't start with the Creation, OT Scripture, Christ, or sin – concepts that were foreign to his audience. Instead, he opened with a subject close to home: the Unknown God. He was not flattering them, rather he was stating as fact that there is the Unknown God whom they must know.

2) Paul used the familiar to introduce the unfamiliar – Acts 17:23c

To Greeks' minds, they never knew how their gods would react to their sacrifice since their gods' temper was as pesky and unpredictable as humans'. But Paul pointed out that his God was not unknowable. This apostle methodically constructed a bridge that would hopefully connect the gap between their ignorance and the truth of Christ.

3) Paul delivered the truth methodically and clearly – Acts 17:24-28a

Here Paul revealed 4 key points:

- Being the Creator of heaven and earth, God cannot be contained in a man-made temple.
- Being the Originator of all life and all things, He doesn't need anything from humans.
- Being the All-Knowing God, He is the One who preappointed times, boundaries, and plans with a complete control. Yet He is approachable and accessible, not like any of the Greek gods or goddesses who were distant beings and had no concern for the problems and needs of men.
- Being the Sustainer of all things, God is not dependent on human, rather we are dependent on Him – His grace, mercy, and love.

4) Paul kept their attention with relevant illustration – Acts 17:28b

Quoting Aratus, a Greek poet, he tries to convince them that God is their Creator by showing that even their own poets believed in a creator-god. How insightful Paul was in taking this poem about Zeus and revealing that its true subject is Jesus Christ!

5) Paul made the truth into personal applications – Acts 17:29-31

Until now, Greek philosophers had always discussed comfortable and non-accountable ideas, but Paul brought them the truth of God that was much too close to home and the accountable fact that God was not only their Creator, but also He was their Judge. Actions today impacted their lives beyond the grave, where the resurrected Jesus awaits.

People in America, including many, many self-serving Christians love the fact that God is love and He loves the human race. But they do everything they can to ignore the fact that God is the Ultimate Judge all the human beings will face one day and we are accountable for our decisions and actions.

Notice that, in v30, Paul didn't say, "I suggest you repent" or "I advise you to repent" or "I hope you repent." Paul was saying that God commands people everywhere to repent. And "repent" means to change your direction, not feeling sorry that you got caught. Instead of running away from God, you run to God.

There are many pastors and churches who do not talk about repentance from sin in fear of losing people. Obviously they are not afraid of the One whom they are going to face one day and to give account for what they teach on this earth.

I said this in our last Midweek study, but it is worth repeating: Any theology that makes sin easy and divine punishment unimportant is not biblical theology.

D. THREE DIFFERENT RESPONSES

Acts 17:32-34 And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this matter." 33 So Paul departed from among them. 34 However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

These three different responses are still the same. Whenever I give an altar call, I can see who is mocking the message of God, not because of the broken English of mine, but because they want to escape the accountability from God. I have this word for you if you are the one who is thinking in the same way: "You can run, but you can not hide from God. Eventually you will give your account to God. Hope that you change your heart before that happens.

The second group says, "I will do it mañana." Guess what, bubba, your tomorrow may never come because you might be standing in the presence of God tomorrow. When you say, "I will do it later," that decision is the same as "No," to Jesus.

E. APPLICATIONS

1) When you evangelize, start where your listener is. Keep it simple, courteous, relevant, and truthful.

2) The result of your evangelism is not up to you. If that person says, "No," do not be discouraged. You did what you were told to do by the Lord.

3) Never dilute the biblical truth for the sake of popularity or acceptance.