



NOVEMBER 7, 2021 | REV. DON MCISAAC

## “When Worldviews Collide” (Acts 17:1-34)

### In Thessalonica

17 When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. 2 As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,” he said. 4 Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.

5 But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd.[a] 6 But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, 7 and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.” 8 When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. 9 Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

### In Berea

10 As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. 11 Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. 12 As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.

13 But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. 14 The believers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. 15 Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

### In Athens

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. 18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. 19 Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” 21 (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)



22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 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. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

24 “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. 27 God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 28 ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’[b] As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’[c]

29 “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” 33 At that, Paul left the Council. 34 Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

Today we will continue with the book of Acts by looking at chapter 17. In this chapter we see Paul enter three different cities: first Thessalonica, then Berea, and finally Athens. In the first two he is accompanied by his companions Silas and Timothy, but he enters Athens solo.

The book of Acts offers very concise descriptions of what happens in the first two cities, so we won’t spend much time in them either other than to make a few observations and comments. Most of the narrative is taken up with the events surrounding Paul’s time in Athens.

So, in Thessalonica we are told that the first place that Paul visited was the synagogue. This, we are told, was his usual custom. He spent about three weeks’ worth of Sabbaths with them reasoning from the scriptures (And it is crucial to understand that the only scriptures they would have acknowledged at that time were the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures).

Of course, he is met with opposition in the form of jealous Jews who created a mob scene within the city. However, the mob cannot find Paul, Silas, or Timothy, and instead grab a brother named Jason and some other believers and accuse them of inviting the “troublemakers” in the first place. A perfect example here of guilt by association.



The first thing we should notice here is that Paul went to the synagogue. This fact has been used to indicate that Paul was very strategic and methodical in his outreach. He would first go to where he was least likely to experience resistance to his message. Where people were more likely to understand the message because they would have the same foundational beliefs.

We also read that many God-fearing Greeks and a few prominent women became followers. This is also indicative of Paul's overall strategy. These Greeks would be already placed within the Greek speaking culture of Thessalonica and therefore, when they became believers, the spread of the gospel would be much more efficient.

Jenny and I have witnessed a variation of this strategy by the Korean missionaries we met in the Former Soviet Union. They would reach out to the local Koreans because of their ethnic affinity with them. The local Koreans knew the language and had already been there for many generations and were therefore an acceptable part of the Russian speaking majority culture. These local Koreans would then proclaim the gospel amongst the other Russian speaking populations or at least invite them to church where they could hear the missionaries preach, and the church would grow. This strategy led to the quick and surprising success of the Korean missionaries in countries where there was already a sizeable Korean diaspora.

We see these same strategies being employed by Paul when he and his companions arrive in Berea after they leave Thessalonica. Much has been said about the Bereans and the attention they paid to Paul's message "in order to see if what Paul said was true". This attention to the message is what led to many of the Jews and Greek men and women believing. Therefore, we can rightly assume that this same type of eagerness to confirm the message of the scriptures was indicative of the Berean Christians who later formed the church there. And that is why, to this day, their example is given to all of us.

Unfortunately, as we are all too aware, wherever the true gospel is preached then opposition will arise. The jealous Jews arrive from Thessalonica and start agitating and stirring up the residents of Berea. Paul is sent away but Silas and Timothy remain behind to, more than likely, train these new eager converts. I think it is important to observe that the message itself is not what the opponents are jealous of but the fact that their followers are converting to it. They are losing their supporters and followers.

What do these observations teach us about how we should go about any future missional activities?



The first would be the importance of establishing a point of contact with those we wish to reach out to. Like Paul, we too should live our lives with the intention of seeing the gospel preached. Paul's intention was quite clear and verses 1 and 2 show us that Paul quickly identified and found ways to connect with people whenever he came to a new location.

The second thing we learn is that Paul consistently explained the Scripture and showed how it pointed to Christ. He never just presented facts about the Bible, but he shared the story of the Bible and showed how it climaxed in the person and work of Jesus. Jesus became the centre of every message as Paul taught about His divine nature, His life, death, and resurrection, His ascension, His rule and coming kingdom.

Even though Paul had suffered on many occasions at the hands of those who hated the message, he still courageously proclaimed it. Throughout history and up to the present day in the name of so-called tolerance we have witnessed and are witnessing an ever-increasing hostility towards Christianity and to Christians. Therefore, we need to ask God to give us the same holy boldness as Paul so that we can faithfully proclaim His Good News.

Thirdly we have the example of how Paul proclaimed the Word intelligently. He makes his case by reasoning from the Scriptures. He is not using God's Word in some superficial or mystical way.

And fourth Paul's life was an example of integrity that served to validate the message he was proclaiming. Last week Pastor Tim reminded us of how important it is to live a life worthy of God.

The result of this faithful proclamation was a variety of responses. We can be encouraged by this as we see that God still converts people through His powerful Word which we are called to faithfully proclaim.

So, as you go out into the world with the intent to live missional lives keep the Word central. God will change neighbourhoods and nations for His glory when we learn and teach His Word.

We now move on to Athens where we find a much different context. The lessons this passage can teach will also be very helpful as we live out our lives for His glory. It is more likely that the people we encounter in our day to day lives will be like those Paul encountered in Athens. Our passage tells us that with the help of some brothers and sisters Paul, eventually ends up in Athens. As we take a closer look at how Paul evangelized the influential city of Athens, we will find some important lessons about how we should be engaging with unbelievers today.



Typically, we will encounter those who are heavily influenced by relativism and pluralism. These two outlooks have resulted in the people we encounter in our day to day lives being more skeptical, and also highly intelligent. So, how can we approach these people with the same courage and confidence that we see Paul has?

Very often it is fear that keeps us from sharing our faith with those around us I know it was for me. In his commentary on the book of Acts, John Stott writes that, “We do not speak like Paul because we do not feel like Paul; this is because we do not see like Paul”. The difference between Paul and us is His perspective. He wasn’t distracted by the history of the city or its many splendours or the intelligence of the citizens. Paul had a Christian worldview.

That might be a new term for some of you so let me give you a working definition: This is the definition I gave to my university students in Tanzania when I taught a first-year course about the Christian Worldview.

Your worldview relates to the most basic beliefs and assumptions you have. It answers the questions you ask about life, the universe, and well, everything.

You can ask, is there a God? If so, what is He like and how do I relate to Him or Her or it? If there is no God does it make a difference?

What is truth and can we know it?

You may ask how the universe was created and where is it heading?

What’s the meaning of life? Does my life have a purpose—and, if it does, what is it?

Is there any meaning to life? To my life?

What does it mean to live a good life? Does it really matter in the end whether or not I live a good life?

And the ultimate question we all ask, is there life after death?

Your worldview influences the answers you give to these kinds of questions.

Because most of us are not even aware that we have a worldview, then another way to think of how it influences our thinking would be to consider how you would answer these questions if you were asked and then given some time to think about the answers. Maybe that would be a good exercise for later and you can find these questions if you listen to this sermon again online on COAH’s YouTube channel.

Worldviews are like cerebellums (an important part of the brain that helps us maintain our balance): everyone has one and we can’t live without them (if we didn’t we’d be falling down a lot), but not everyone knows that they have one.

A worldview is as necessary for thinking as an atmosphere is for breathing.

Think of it like the air that surrounds us. It’s very important, but we usually don’t give it a second thought. (Unless you are in Seoul, or Beijing, or LA, or Toronto in the summer). So that analogy, like all others, usually isn’t helpful the more we consider the details. How about we think of it this way:





A worldview is like a pair of eye glasses with colored lenses, it affects what you see and how you see it. Depending on the “color” of the lenses, you see some things more easily, while other things may be distorted. In some cases, you don’t see things at all.

So, when you become a Christian, the way you see everything changes. The reason for this is because as we read and study the Bible we discover a whole set of new beliefs. Beliefs about God, creation, humanity, sin, redemption, and the kingdom of God. These theological beliefs and the other teachings we find in the Bible affect how we now view the world.

Even though we still enjoy a lot of the same activities as our non-Christian friends, colleagues, and even relatives, we look and think about them differently. We see and think about the arts, music, sports, business, and ethnicity differently. We have a different viewpoint about the poor, the orphan, the widow. We look at nature and the rest of creation differently. We view sex, gender, marriage, life, death... all differently because now we see them through the filter of God’s perspective. And we find God’s perspective, His assessment, of everything through His self-revelation in creation, in the Scriptures, and most completely in His Son Jesus.

It’s important to remember for us to be aware that everyone has a worldview.

In our passage Paul encounters two competing worldviews in Athens. The worldviews of the Epicurean and the Stoic philosophers. They saw the world differently from Paul as well as each other. We will find the same conditions today. Our classmates, our neighbours, even those we attend church with may see things differently from us because they have completely different set of beliefs.

One thing that has stuck with me throughout my Christian walk has been a question the author James Sire asked in his book entitled, “the Universe Next Door” which I read for a course I took in Bible college. He wrote, “This is a question that each person must ask, ‘is my worldview true and coherent, and do I consistently apply it to everything?’”

When we look at the world thorough the Christian worldview, we can quickly see that it is full of idols. An idol is anything we turn to when we need something only Jesus can provide. So, they are not just statues that are worshipped at shrines. They are in fact substitute gods that will replace the true and living God in our hearts. For example, money and success can become our idol and we can end up pursuing it at all costs because we think that it will make us happy and fulfill us. Something that only believing and following Jesus can give. The Bible consistently reveals throughout its pages that bowing to idols only serves to increase our sorrow.

So, the question we should ask at this point is, “what was central to Paul’s worldview?” What caused him to see the world differently? Why was he affected like he was by the many idols he saw in Athens. In verse 16 of our passage, it says he was “greatly distressed”. The Greek word that is translated by this expression is *paroxyno*. The Septuagint which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament uses this same word to describe how God feels



about idolatry. When the Israelites worshipped idols, we are told that they “provoked the Lord” and He responded with righteous anger. God responded in this way because he loved His people. He wanted them to worship Him alone. Paul saw God’s character being profaned in Athens by this idol worship and he was ‘paroxyneto’ out of love for God and for his neighbour. In the same way we see Jesus get angry at those who were making the temple a den of robbers in Mark 11:12-19.

It is only when we have this same type of commitment to the truth, in addition to compassion for people, that we will be effective when sharing the good news. If this type of commitment is foreign to you. If this type of compassion does not describe you then spend more time thinking about the cross of Jesus. Because it is there, at the cross, that we can see very clearly not only God’s own commitment to perfect holiness but also His great compassion for sinners.

Paul saw the world differently, and he felt differently about the idols in this world, because what was central to his worldview was the cross of Christ.

In Athens we see Paul’s Christian worldview ‘collide’ with worldviews that were radically different from his own. Whereas in Thessalonica and Berea he had encountered Jews and God-fearing gentiles. Therefore, we discern that his approach to them was vastly different than his approach to those he met in Athens.

In Thessalonica and Berea Paul, met the unbelievers in their places of worship on the day when they were sure to be there, and reasoned from the scriptures they all were familiar with, explaining and proving that Jesus was the Messiah. In Athens however, He didn’t wait for the Sabbath day to preach the gospel. Instead, day by day, he ‘mixed things up’ so to speak in the agora. He was right there in the marketplace of ideas, and he entered into discussions with the people.

Two groups that we see mentioned by name in our passage are the Epicureans and the Stoics. So, in what way do their worldviews differ from Paul’s?

First, the Epicureans. Their worldview was essentially Materialism. Materialists don’t believe in a God who provides everything for His creation. Their main goal was to live a life free from as much pain as possible while pursuing as much pleasure as possible. This was how they viewed the lifestyle of their gods. Their ‘catch phrase’ could have been something like, “You only live once” or “If it feels good, do it”. Do you know people like this? Are you like this?

The Stoics, on the other hand, had a different view of the world. Their catchphrase would have been more like, “Grin and bear it; there is nothing you can do about it anyway”. Their emphasis when it came to life was on submission, and painful endurance. If we were to give their worldview a title it would be ‘fatalism’.



Of course, both these world views were, and are, hopeless and meaningless. Why is understanding the worldview of those we are trying to reach important? Because like Paul, we become able to tailor our approach, even though the content of the message must remain unchanged. During the time my family spent on the mission field I quickly realized that the majority of my evangelistic efforts were spent just breaking down the walls of hostility to Christianity that had been created in the people by a lifetime of assumptions and presuppositions. The best way, we found, to do that was to meet the people where they were. Over conversations that were had in socially acceptable atmospheres we could share the good news. That was the main reason we started the Jaryk centre. We wanted to provide activities that they had said would help them, like teaching English. This became one socially acceptable way to meet them.

However, there is still one question that remains for us to consider in this passage. At least it nagged at me for the longest time. Why did so few people believe Paul's message? Despite his tailored approach. Despite his mastery of the subject matter (I mean Paul knew his way around the Scriptures). Despite his impassioned speeches and pleas and all his reasoning. Why did the majority of his hearers not believe the truth of the gospel that he proclaimed? For that matter why do most people. Why do our friends, neighbours, and relatives who hear the gospel truth today not believe? Is it because we ourselves are so unsure of the message and therefore lack the necessary confidence? Possibly, but not always. Is it because we accuse and judge unbelievers rather than helping them understand? Could be. But again, not always.

The reason, according to the Bible, is found in the teaching we have come to know as 'Total Depravity'. I can see a lot of 'squirming' as if you are saying "No. Don't go there", "Why waste a perfectly good sermon by bringing up such a divisive issue?". Well quite simply I wouldn't bring it up if it wasn't taught throughout the Bible.

For those of you who don't know I'm referring to the theological system that is known as Calvinism. There is a part of that system that deals with salvation. This point 'Total Depravity' is just the first part of that teaching on salvation. But it is a very important foundational part that helps us understand the rest of the theology.

In summary what it teaches is that all of humanity is totally depraved. The reason, I think this term upsets some people is because they think that what I am saying is that they are totally bad all the time, they are always at their very worst. But believe me when I say that we could still be a lot worse! We could still commit one more sin, tell one more lie, cheat one more time, just one more of those things would make us worse sinners than before

So, let me try to explain this Biblical concept using another term. "Total Inability". I use that phrase because that is what was intended by the reformed theologians who coined the expression in the 17th century in response to some teaching that they couldn't accept and wanted to counter by making very clear what the Bible teaches.





The Bible very clearly teaches how pervasive sin is. Humanity, as a result of the first sin in the garden of Eden, is completely and hopelessly affected by sin. In fact, we are like sponges that when dipped in water become completely saturated. Even though we are squeezed out, there remains some water. Even with only a little residual sin, maybe so little as a drop. We would still never be allowed into the holy presence of God. And no matter how hard we squeeze, the sponge will never be dry, there will always be one drop. As 1 John 1:8 tells us, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us”. It’s important to note that in this verse John is writing to his ‘dear children’ in other words, other believers. Of course the very next verse reveals that the sponge will not be considered dry until it is exposed to the purifying light of the Son that is (note the spelling S.O.N.).

Now, we do not need to believe this doctrine first in order to be saved. The Bible teaches us in Acts 16:31 that we need to, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved”.

Believe that He is the Son of God.

Believe that his substitutionary death paid the penalty for our sins.

Believe that He is in heaven interceding for us at this moment.

Two things I want to note personally about this doctrine. First, I did not accept this teaching until much later in my Christian life. When I began to study the Bible more seriously however, then this doctrine became almost inescapable, and it served to help explain a lot of other passages that I didn’t fully understand. Second, as I also accepted the rest of the reformed teaching on salvation, rather than find it depressing because before I have thought of it as leading to a fatalistic view, I found it to be very encouraging and freeing. Because when I realized that the teaching of scripture is that I did nothing to affect my initial salvation then I became more inclined to accept and trust God’s help through the process of sanctification. The most profound effect is that this acceptance made my proclamation more natural. I do not put the added pressure of thinking that my performance matters. (Making sure I am teaching the truth is pressure enough). Those whom God has called will come. For no other reason than, because of His great love and mercy, he has chosen to use us to call His people through His Word.

So, the message of this sermon is that there will always be a worldview clash whenever we attempt to proclaim the gospel truth. And as ministers of the message of reconciliation we are charged with creating as little offence for the Gospel as we can. Therefore, it is very helpful to know the worldview of our audience so that we can deliver this unchanging message in a way that is easily understood and acceptable.

But that is not why people do not accept the truth. They do not, cannot, accept the truth because they are totally affected by sin. This situation seems hopeless, unless someone, who is able, makes it possible and frees them from their condition. That is our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. And that is the message we must proclaim.



Let's pray. Thank You, for opening our eyes to the truth of salvation, that only the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, 2000 years ago, can pay the price for our sin. Thank You that by believing in Him we may be forgiven.

Thank You, that Jesus became the sacrifice for our sin, so that by believing in Him we can be redeemed from death and receive forgiveness of sins. We praise You for this incredible exchange that took place at the cross. Jesus took our sin and gave us His righteousness. He died in our place so that we could live with You forever.

Thank You, that each of us has been delivered from the dominion of darkness and eternal separation from You and have been transferred into the kingdom of Your dear Son. Thank You, Father, for this wonderful transaction, which is a free gift of Your grace to all who believe, even though it cost you so much.

Thank You, that by His punishment for our sins, we have been declared righteous in Jesus and are seated with Him in heavenly places. Help us to walk in the light as He is in the light and may the light of His character be reflected through us to others, so that they too may come to trust in the only begotten Son of God and receive forgiveness of their sins. We ask this in His name,

Amen.