

Paul's Sermon on Mars Hill: A Biblical Model for Practical Apologetics

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In the introduction to his book *Reasonable Faith*, William Lane Craig states, “Apologetics (from the Greek *apologia*: a defense) is that branch of Christian theology which seeks to provide a rational justification for the truth claims of the Christian faith.” Craig goes on to state that though primarily a theoretical discipline Apologetics has practical applications as well⁷. Since the Enlightenment and especially during the twentieth century, Christian Apologetics has become an increasingly broad field of study. With the rise of various skeptics and scientific theories to explain away, or at least reduce the role of the divine within the universe, Christian thinkers have risen to meet these various intellectual challenges head on, pulling from not only the words of scripture, but from disciplines as diverse as mathematics, philosophy, quantum theory, molecular biology and current Big Bang Cosmology⁸.

As the field of Christian Apologetics spreads into every area of culture, the temptation facing the modern apologist is to move beyond the Biblical account and fight the battle entirely on the enemies' grounds, letting the area of thought in dispute be the determining boundary for argumentation. Thus, the apologist seeking to defend belief in the divine creator using, for example, evidence of the Strong Anthropic Principle in the formation of the universe may feel that the words of Scripture are not as useful due to their having arising within the very universe whose intelligent design is in dispute. “Before I can appeal to the Bible as the word of God,” he or she may think, “I must first show that the existence of God is indeed probable.”

While there is much truth to this line of reasoning, there is a subtle danger. Namely, that in attempting to show the truth of the Gospel predominantly from the evidence outside of the Biblical account, one may end up paying little attention to the Biblical account altogether. Or, to put it another way, the apologetic endeavor may

⁷ Craig, William Lane, *Reasonable Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994) p. xi

⁸ Blaise Pascal, William A. Dembski, J.P. Moreland, Peter Kreeft, Henry “Fritz” Schaefer III, Michael Behe, and Hugh Ross are among a handful of examples of these diverse apologists.

become so theoretical that it's original purpose, which is to defend the truthfulness of the Gospel, becomes lost in the murky depths of scientific or philosophical argumentation.

Balance must be maintained between engaging an unbelieving culture and remaining faithful to the written Word of God. The purpose of this paper is to show how such a balance is maintained in the Apostle Paul's sermon at Mars Hill, as well as the results that followed and the implications this account has in our present day apologetic encounters. We will begin by looking at the setting in which the sermon took place. Then we will examine the tactics Paul used, noting what he stresses as well as what he omits. Finally, we will conclude by looking at the results of the sermon among those who heard it. Throughout the work, practical implications for the modern apologetic and evangelistic tasks will be brought to light.

The account begins in Acts 17:16 where we find Paul waiting for Timothy and Silas in Athens. Paul's spirit is aroused, or as the NRSV puts it, "deeply distressed" by the idolatry within the city. As a result of this he begins to argue with those in the synagogue as well as those in the marketplace. Two things in this passage should be noted. First, Paul didn't travel to Athens with the intention of preaching there. Rather, he was brought there by fellow believers to escape the crowd that had been incited by his preaching in Berea. However Paul, "Having no design, as it seems, to preach at Athens, but his zeal for God drew him into it unawares, without staying till his companions came,"⁹ proclaims the Gospel to the Athenians. Paul was embodying the principle set forth by his fellow apostle Peter which states that a believer should "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you . . ." ¹⁰ This has much to say to us as Christians today, for like the Athenians, ours is a culture abounding with idolatry as well as countless opportunities to share the Gospel.

The second point of interest is found in the fact that Paul argued; and not only that, but he argued with the Jews in the synagogue as well as the people in the market place. Many within the Church's ranks today feel that arguing is not Christ-like and has

⁹ Wesley, John, *Commentary on the book of Acts* on the "Bible Explorer: Version 2.0 Deluxe" CD ROM. (San Jose: Epiphany)

¹⁰ 1 Peter 3:15

no place in sharing the Gospel. This is unfortunately due to the fact that at times Christians have replaced the conviction of the Holy Spirit in regards to a person's conversion experience with argument and reasoning. As a result, many Christians have taken the opposite path and abandoned the use of argumentation and reason altogether as unbiblical, or useful only when discoursing in the halls of academia. This is in clear contrast with Scripture for here we see the apostle arguing not just with the "intellectual folk" (the Stoics and Epicureans) or the "religious folk" (in the synagogue), but also with the "everyday folk" (in the market place). For Paul, despite the fact that the Gospel did not rest solely on "wise and persuasive words," it could certainly be, and often was, proclaimed using reason and argumentation. In regards to the abandonment of reason, Wesley rightly notes:

How does he (almost in the words of Tauler) decry reason, right or wrong, as an irreconcilable enemy to the Gospel of Christ! Whereas, what is reason (the faculty so called) but the power of apprehending, judging, and discoursing? Which power is no more to be condemned in the gross, than seeing, hearing, or feeling (sic).¹¹

With regards to their unbelief, many nonbelievers hide behind the wall of the Gospel's apparent unreasonableness. As long as Christians refrain from engaging their culture intellectually, these unbelievers will remain behind their hollow wall and never be exposed to the saving power of the gospel.

Moving on in the text, we find another curious phenomenon. Though the Athenian philosophers considered Paul's talk of Jesus and the resurrection "Idle babbling" about "strange deities" they nevertheless took him to Mars Hill (the Areopagus) and asked if he would explain his "new teaching." Luke parenthetically tells us that the Athenians were always looking for opportunities to say something different or hear something new. This is interesting because Athens was considered the center of knowledge in the ancient world. And yet, despite being immersed in the various religions and philosophies of the day, the Athenian philosophers still had a craving for some kind of new truth. Amidst an extremely pluralistic society there was still something about the message of the Gospel that intrigued them. This is very much the case within modern academia. One need only

¹¹ Wesley, John, *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) p. 315. This is part of Wesley's entry from June 15, 1741 and is in the context of Wesley's criticism of Luther's "Commentation on the Epistle to the Galatians."

observe apologetic lectures or open-air preaching on college campuses to see how people, though they disagree with (and sometimes despise) the message, will spend literally hours listening and debating with the apologist or preacher. In fact it has been argued by some that the modern university is a sort of Areopagus of our time, that “the Universities control the mind of America”¹².

Later in his sermon, Paul goes on to tell us that people everywhere are searching and even groping for God. In his mind, the Athenians’ temple to the unknown god no doubt provides an example of such searching. According to his letter to the church in Rome, God’s presence is a reality that even the most callous skeptic is aware of. All of this should serve as a constant reminder to the Christian that no matter how much people ridicule or revile the message of the cross, there is still a yearning for truth in our culture that only the Gospel can fulfill.

It is also worth noting the beliefs of Paul’s listeners and their similarity to the ideals prevalent in our society. The Epicureans adhered to a naturalistic philosophy that deemed pleasure the ultimate goal. The Stoics, though also naturalistic, saw virtue as the highest good. The current philosophies of hedonism and humanism, Hefner and Turner, if you will, have much in common with these philosophies of old.

Paul’s tactics give us valuable insight into the mindset of the apostle, as well as serving as an excellent example of balance in the presentation of the Gospel. Though no doubt prompted by the Holy Spirit, the tactics Paul uses in this sermon can, and indeed should be utilized by those engaged in the modern day apologetic task. Let us now examine these tactics and see what can be gleaned from them that will help us in our search for a practical apologetic.

Right from the start, one cannot help but notice the politeness with which Paul addresses his listeners. Though his spirit was deeply distressed by their idolatry, he still addresses them with respect. It is a common temptation, especially in an argumentative atmosphere, to see nonbelievers as “the enemy” and to speak to them as such. This is not Paul’s tactic in this passage or in any of his epistles for that matter. In fact, throughout

¹²Smock, Jed, *Who Will Rise Up?* (Newark: Huntington House, 1985). The famous (or infamous, depending on who one talks to!) open-air campus preacher George “Brother Jed” Smock makes this point in this controversial, yet interesting autobiography.

his writings it can be argued that his harshest words are directed at those who claim to be believers. We, as Christians, must remember this as we engage the nonbeliever. It should be the Gospel that offends rather than the one who proclaims the Gospel.

However, lest we think that the Christian should sacrifice truth on the altar of politeness, we now turn to an equally visible aspect of Paul's message: his incredible boldness. Paul doesn't beat around the bush, so to speak, in dealing with the religion of the Athenians. He tells them in no uncertain terms that the faith they possess in their idols is not only misplaced, but also foolish seeing as that the idols they worship as gods were fashioned by their very own hands. Though undoubtedly offensive to his audience, this was truth that they needed to hear. At the opposite end of the spectrum from those seeking to offend are those Christians who feel that an unbeliever should never be told anything they might object to. This extreme form of seeker-sensitive apologetics is foreign not only to Paul, but to the entire witness of scripture. Many may be offended, but the Christian's responsibility is to proclaim this message lovingly and faithfully, seeking neither to offend nor to appease those listening.

The one tactic of Paul in this sermon that has befuddled so many Christians who study it is his citing of pagan poets to strengthen his own argument. Though the exact sources of these quotes are disputed, there is good evidence to believe that they were spoken by Minos of Crete in Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus*. The philosophers of Paul's day interpreted them as speaking of the Logos, or truth itself¹³. Whatever meaning they had to the Athenians, Paul uses them, as well as his referencing of the local temple of the unknown god, to describe Yahweh, the One True God, the God of Israel. An important principle is seen here: the use of familiar language of a culture to engage that culture with the Gospel message. Paul draws on imagery with which his audience is familiar with and speaks to them in language they can relate to and understand. This is arguably the single most important aspect of this sermon in terms of apologetic value. Indeed, the very nature of apologetics is to enter into the worldview of the nonbeliever and demonstrate the truth of the Gospel in and over their worldview's objections. All truth is God's truth; therefore wherever truth is found in a culture, its source is ultimately the God of the

¹³ Marshall, I. Howard, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Acts* (Grand Rapids. Eerdmans, 1998) p. 289

Bible. It is the task of the apologist to demonstrate this to the nonbeliever. As we see with Paul here in Athens, an effective apologetic does not refrain from using whatever inroads into the culture that may arise; indeed the apologist should look for any available truth present within the culture and then use such truth to point the way to Christ.

Recently, more than a few Christians have taken notice to the Biblical truths sprinkled, albeit unintentionally, throughout the various media of music, television and movies.¹⁴

Concerning Christian engagement of modern culture, John R.W. Stott has notes the following:

There is an urgent need for more Christian thinkers who will dedicate their minds to Christ, not only as lecturers, but also as authors, journalists, dramatists and broadcasters, as television script-writers, producers and personalities, and as artists and actors who use a variety of art forms in which to communicate the gospel. All these can do battle with contemporary non-Christian philosophies and ideologies in a way which resonates with thoughtful, modern men and women, and so at least gain a hearing for the gospel by the reasonableness of its presentation. Christ calls human beings to humble, but not to stifle, their intellect.¹⁵

A cursory reading of Paul's sermon may lead one to view his discourse as a sort of purely theistic, or "beginner apologetic." This is due to Paul's omission of theological truths such as the Doctrine of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the Atonement, Sanctification, and detailed eschatological teaching. However, upon closer inspection, Paul's sermon is rich with theology concerning the nature of God, the nature of man, and God's redemptive plan.

Paul's teaching on the nature of God consists of several aspects of God that render Him superior to the Athenians' gods. Paul preaches that God is known by, as well as near to mankind. God is the all-powerful, omni-present creator and sustainer of all that exists. This is in clear contrast with the petty, immoral, finite, distant deities thought to inhabit Mt. Olympus. However, unlike the Greek gods who see humans as pawns to be used and manipulated, the God of which Paul speaks desires to be in relationship with mankind.

¹⁴ Examples of the use of the media to illuminate Scriptural truths can be found in the writings of William Dembski, Steve Beard and Ravi Zacharias.

¹⁵ Stott, John R.W., *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990) p. 281

As to the nature of humanity, Paul teaches that though humans are the special creation of God, they are ignorant of their creator and have fashioned idols with their own hands to take His place. Humans are sinful in the eyes of God, according to Paul, and are to repent. This contradicts the optimistic outlook regarding the human spirit present among the various philosophies of that period. Paul ends by stating that God has provided a way to escape the coming judgment; He has appointed a man to be that way by raising him from the dead. As we can see, Paul's sermon not only has significant apologetic value, but also contains much theology as well.

The question that now remains is "What was the result of this incredible apologetic sermon?" Surely the Athenians were persuaded by the depth of Paul's message. Surely they were convicted by the Holy Spirit and rushed forward begging, "What must we do to be saved?" Thousands came to know Christ and were baptized into the faith, right? As one can see, this is not the case at all.

Upon hearing about the resurrection from the dead, many scoffed, some postponed a decision pending a further hearing and only a few believed. In reading this passage, one can easily visualize the crowd of Athenian philosophers walking away shaking their heads. Some of them no doubt wondered how a man as educated as Paul could put his faith in a God whose ultimate miracle consisted in raising one man from the dead in a remote outskirt of the Roman Empire. Many today have this same feeling towards the message of Christianity. Many mock and scoff at the notion of the God of the universe coming in the form of a Jewish Carpenter and dying a criminal's death so that the sins of all those who believe might be erased. Others are intrigued, but do not commit for various reasons. It is worth noting that Paul did not chase after those who left, offering to tone down his rhetoric so that his message might be more palatable and gain a wider acceptance. Paul does no such thing. The text indicates that as soon as he was done preaching, Paul left them. He had done his part; he had preached the Word. The audience's response was left to themselves and the Holy Spirit. This is a valuable lesson for the Christian today. Many (especially within Evangelical ranks) equate numbers with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. A successful sermon is one that sees many come to the altar to give their lives to Christ. A successful church is one that has reached a certain growth percentage within a certain period of time. If people are turned

away by the proclamation of the Gospel, it is due to the insensitivity or incompetence of the one speaking. This passage illustrates the flaw in such thinking. Paul did not preach a deficient sermon, nor did he “come on too strong.” For, as Jesus taught many times throughout his earthly ministry, not all will receive the Word of God with an open heart. The Christian’s responsibility is not to make sure many accept the message, only that many hear the message.

Specifically, for the apologist, the responsibility lies in being able to demonstrate that belief in the message of the cross is neither unreasonable nor irrational. The role of apologetics is to tear down intellectual strongholds and push past intellectual smoke screens present in the lives of unbelievers, to plow the fields of the mind so that the seed of the Gospel can find fertile ground and not be hindered by the weeds of falsehood. Because of the specificity of the apologetic task, the apologist must realize that he or she is just one link in the chain of events that may eventually lead to the salvation one or more among his or her audience.

Lest it be said that Paul’s encounter with the Athenians was of no gain, Luke ends by informing the reader that a few did become believers and, not to be vague, gives the names of two of them. This should be an encouragement to the modern Christian in the face of apparent rejection of the Gospel by the masses. God’s Word, indeed, does not return without having accomplished His purpose.

In the end, what is there to be learned from Acts 17:16-34? Hardened hearts will scoff, searching hearts will ponder, and believing hearts will be saved. Rather than trying to discern the state of the hearer’s heart and then tailoring the message to fit the hearer’s needs, today’s Christian must, in the spirit of Paul, passionately preach the truth of the Gospel in it’s fullness and leave the rest up to God. This is the essence of the Great Commission and is exemplified nowhere better in all of Scripture than in the account of Paul’s speech on Mars Hill.