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# TWEETING THE GOSPEL

## BIBLE STUDY MONTH

Week Five

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Acts 17:16-32

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*“My persona will never be that of a wallflower - I’d rather build walls than cling to them.”*

Can you guess who said that?

It was Donald Trump, the idiosyncratic, brash, somewhat gung-ho President of the United States.

Despite what you may think about this world leader, Donald Trump is considered to be a master of modern social media. While he constantly uses divisive phrases, cites harsh, even ugly words and refers to rather violent, combative imagery, Donald Trump appeals to a certain sort of logic. He alludes to a peculiar kind of credibility and evokes a real degree of emotion.

This is epitomized in the tweet: *“First there was the Declaration of Independence, then there was the Constitution. Now there is Time to Get Tough.”*

This approach is further conveyed in a tweet about North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un last January. President Trump goes on to say:

*“North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times. Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger and more powerful one than his, and my Button works!”*

The truth of the matter is that, through his tweets, Donald Trump does not actually convey the news, he IS the news! And with nearly 6.3 million followers on Twitter, what Donald Trump has to say gets noticed!

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Researchers tell us that the way in information is communicated, the form in which news is delivered has a big impact on how that information is perceived and how it's interpreted. In other words, it's not simply the message that's important. What really counts is the way that message is communicated.

Here the impact of Donald Trump's twitters, his effective use of rhetoric and his appeal to a certain sort of logic, a peculiar kind of credibility and a real ability to tap deeply into people's emotions makes him an expert in the art of getting his message across.

And in today's world of information overload, no matter how right or wrong Donald Trump may be, he proves to be a very effective operator!

Another effective operator when it comes to communicating the message was that enigmatic, passionate, genius, the Apostle Paul.



Paul was far from being a “spin doctor” or a propagandist. Paul's message was quite different. It was a message revealed to him by God concerning God's unconditional love for all people. There were no secret agendas, there were no disguised truths.

Paul's rhetoric was neither mischievous or seductive. It did not appeal to people's darker side like so many commentators these days. Rather, the message Paul conveyed focused on a God who loves us so much that he gave his only Son so that we will have life and have it in all its fullest.

But the secret to Paul's effectiveness was, indeed, his ability get this message across. Paul's audience was a pretty hard-headed sophisticated, ambitious lot who lived in a world of conflicting truths, diverse faiths, dubious morality and brutal political power.

And here Paul's genius really thrives as he steps outside the safety of the synagogue to preach in the market place and to face the elites of Athens in what was that city's most venerable place.

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Today we encounter Paul on the 'Areopagus', a small rocky outcrop northwest of the Acropolis. Also known in Latin as 'Mars Hill', the Areopagus was more than a place. It was also the name of a prestigious council of elders who originally met to lay the foundations of democracy in ancient Greece. In Paul's time the Areopagus was a venue where magistrates, academics and legislators gathered to discuss matters of law, philosophy and politics.

And so Paul faces his audience.

Paul begins by currying favour with those gathered. *"Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way"* he says after having toured the city, noticing *"the objects of your worship"* and finding altar with the inscription *"To an unknown god"* (v 22-23).

By touching on the familiar, Paul seizes an opportunity to make his mark: *"What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives all to mortals life and breath and all things"* (v:24).

Paul claims this *"unknown god"* is none other than the Creator God, a God who is separate and not subject to the created order.

Paul then goes on to talk about God's creation of humanity. *"From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth"*. This takes place in in the context of *"orderly seasons and boundaries"* (v.26) a notion that resonates with the Greco-Roman understandings.

Humanity is created, Paul says, to live within this order and to *"search for God"*. But unlike the spiritual seeking and the religious searching that was going in the pagan world, Paul makes the point that God is both close and personal. God *"is not far from each one of us"*, (v.27) Paul says.



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The theological word here is “immanence” meaning, unlike the so-called “high” gods of the Greco-Roman world, God is not distant, God is not beyond reach. Unlike the Greek Zeus or the Roman Jupiter, God is present with us. Paul explains this so eloquently in the words: *“For, in him we live and have our being” (v.28).*

Paul’s argument then pivots on a citation from one the local poets as Paul brings the Stoic philosopher, Aratus, into play with the words: *“For we too are his offspring” (v.28).* Here Paul is saying each and every one of us are children of God.

Paul then seizes an opportunity to have a go at the idolatry of his time. He declares that no image *“formed by the art and imagination of mortals” (v.29)* ie, no image made by humankind could possibly be anything but a distortion of the image of God.

Paul then concludes his sermon by announcing that it’s time for his audience to repent of their ignorance of God. There is no intention here to add another god to Athenian’s crowded pantheon. Rather, Paul says it’s now time for these learned gentlemen to get things right. For everyone, Greek, Roman, Jew and whoever, will be drawn together and made accountable before the one who God raised from the dead.

Now, up until this point, Paul’s audience was with him. Paul carefully negotiated a path or a way that appealed to his audience’s sense of logic, that developed a degree of credibility among these elite thinkers and connected with their emotion desires to learn more. But any mention of resurrection, ie. the idea of Jesus being raised from the dead, left a few of them hostile and cold.

However Paul’s effort were not in vain. Others asked to hear more. Meanwhile some even joined Paul and became followers of Jesus. Here Luke, the author of Acts, includes the specific names of Dionysius and Damaris.

Friends, Paul’s Areopagus sermon is a masterful piece of communication to a sophisticated, well-educated group of enquirers. Sometimes this sermon is criticized for lacking explicit citations to scripture or for not specifically mentioning the name of Jesus.

But in all of this, Paul brilliantly conveys a message and negotiates a path that hits the spot in terms of those who gathered to listen. The medium used by Paul was just as important as the message Paul sought to convey!

For you see, how we speak about God and the way we choose to share our faith is vitally important.

This is particularly so in a changing world where the name of Christ is often known better as a term used to curse or as an expletive to suddenly express anger or surprise.

Indeed, Paul’s marvelous effort on the Areopagus in ancient Athens is an example of what is now needed to reach those who have no understanding of Christ or perceive Christians as simply being a funny bunch of misfits who do strange things on Sunday mornings.

# Good News!

As I reflect on Paul's sermon on the Areopagus, there are three particular things that nudge me.

Firstly, the Good News of Jesus Christ is for everyone. This is stressed in very first chapter of Acts when Jesus commands his followers to be *"my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth"* (Acts 1:8).

Secondly, we, as followers of Jesus, have a responsibility to share this Good News with others in ways that speak their language, makes some real sense in their lives, is truly credible to the listener and connects with the yearnings and the needs of those who receive it.

And thirdly, in sharing the message, we should never compromise the essential truth of what we are saying by allowing the medium to overtake us by becoming the message.

So-called "prosperity theology" is a case in point. Here the message of the Gospel is massaged into a success story for those in middle Australia who want to get on in life. Lines like "God wants you to be rich" or "if only had enough faith then God will heal you" come to mind.

Then there is the tragic subversion of "evangelicalism" in places like the US where the term, which is meant to declare the Good News of Jesus Christ, has been embellished in trends towards authoritarianism, directions towards bigotry and the adoption of an insular, exclusive nationalism

And there is the rise of "progressivism" in Australia and other places where social agendas and an appeal to the contemporary can both shape and drive the message that is to be shared.

Paul never compromises or dilutes the message. But he does deliver the message in a way that can be comprehended, that can be trusted and can connect.

Friends the Good News of Jesus is so important that it must be offered to all people in all places in ways that makes sense, in ways that can be trusted and in ways that can connect with the real yearnings and authentic needs of those who are to receive it.

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Today we come to the end of our study of the Acts of the Apostles. Over the past five weeks we have touched on this most important New Testament book, a narrative that bears witness to Jesus and his risen, life-giving power.

How might we proceed?

President Donald Trump may not be our best role model but his mastering of twitter says something. When sharing the Good News of Jesus we must do so as if nothing more matters. When communicating the generous, unconditional love of God we must do so with all the resources we can get our hands on. We must do so with all the enthusiasm, passion and energy that is available.

I sometimes I wonder what would Paul do today? Where would he preach? And how would he do so?

And you know, somehow, I see this marvelous man standing there among the crowd, perhaps on Epping station, I-Phone in hand - tweeting the Gospel!

What do you think?

Amen.



**(see over for Questions/Discussion)**

## **Acts 17:16-34**

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, 'What does this babbling man want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.' (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.)

So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.' Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god."

What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring."

Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.'

At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

## QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

- Paul preached outside the synagogues in the market place and other public places. In this text Paul preached on the Areopagus to Athens' elite citizens. Where are the "Areopagus" places in our community?
- Why do you think these magistrates, academics and philosophers took the time to listen to Paul? What kind of impact do you think did Paul have on them?
- How do you understand the "immanence" of God (see p.4 of the sermon)?
- Can you think of a time or a place where the medium (the way the message is communicated) dominates, re-shapes or becomes the message. Is this a good or a bad thing? Why?
- How might we best communicate the Good News of Jesus Christ today?

