

You Shall Be Of Me Witnesses in the Supreme Court

by Ron R. Ritchie

In 1972, Ray Stedman, Ed Woodhall and I were invited to West Point Military Academy to hold a conference for cadets and officers, under the auspices of Officers' Christian Fellowship. One evening, our hosts, Rich and Marty Carlson, invited their neighbor, Major John Landry, professor of social sciences at West Point, over for dessert. Ed, Rich and I were so tired we sat on the floor in the livingroom, listening to a conversation between Ray Stedman and the major.

They quickly got on the subject of theology, and began to talk about Dante's "Inferno." Then they discussed the, theology of a couple of Russian authors, and that led into further discussion on the theology of Thomas Jefferson. The major made a comment about something that Thomas Jefferson had once said about God. Ray replied that yes, Jefferson said that, but he had said it when he was 23 years old, whereas later on in life he had said such and such. I remember being struck by the fact that Ray was able to converse on his own level with a man who did not know Jesus Christ. I listened as Ray, with one foot in the Word of God and one foot in the world of God, so to speak, began to build a bridge to reach this man with the gospel. The major was so encouraged that he invited Ray to join him in his social studies class next morning to give a witness for Jesus Christ.

If we are going to witness for Christ it is very important to know the Word of God, but it is also very important that we understand the world which God has created and the people who live in the world. Christians have the mind of Christ, the heart of Christ and the love of Christ, and that enables them to communicate with non-believers in a loving way. We should meet such people on their level, and not expect them to meet us at our level. Since that evening at West Point ten years ago, I have continually sought to understand the world and its thinking, to read what the world reads, to see what the world sees, to think what the world thinks, to show an interest in what they are interested in, so that as I walk among the people of the world I can relate to where they are at in this day and age.

In this series of messages. I have selected a number of incidents from the Book of Acts to remind us and encourage us that we are living in the age of the Spirit, an age which began at Pentecost and which will continue until Jesus comes again. During that time, the Holy Spirit has been given to believers to empower them to be witnesses for Christ in his plan of redemption, so that God can call out men and women from all over the world for his namesake. Everywhere we go, God wants to use us to this end. All we have to do is show up; the Holy Spirit will do the rest. For instance, I get my gas at a station near the church, and I have always made a point of asking the attendant how he was doing, etc. After many such visits, the guy finally said to me, "One of these days I want to know why you are always so happy." I said, "Funny you should mention it. One of these days I'll tell you." I did nothing to encourage this man's question. The Lord Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is working in the heart of a man at a gas station because by the power of God I showed some interest in him.

Last week we looked at the first stage of a European tour, organized by the Holy Spirit for the apostle Paul and his traveling companions, Silas, Luke, and Timothy, about the year 51 A.D. The tour had begun at Philippi, where Paul and Silas spent a night in jail, and then it moved on to Thessalonica, where the disciples "upet the whole world." (Acts 17:6) The next stop was Berea, but the Jews who had stirred up the trouble in Thessalonica soon arrived to cause more trouble in that city, forcing a temporary split-up of the tour party, Paul going on to Athens, with Timothy and Silas remaining in Berea.

Let's see what new adventures the Holy Spirit has in store for Paul, as he awaits his fellow-tourists, Silas and Timothy, at the next stop on the tour, Athens.

1. Witnessing In The City (Acts 17:16-21)

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him

as he was beholding the city full of idols. 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. And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. And 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. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; we want to know therefore what these things mean." (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)

Paul's spirit was provoked by the false and futile idol worship

By this time, the city of Athens was about 600 years old. The birthplace of democracy, Athens was named after Athena, the virgin goddess who was enshrined in the beautiful Parthenon of the Acropolis. Athens was a university city, where in former years students from all over the known world sat at the feet of the great philosophers, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Three ideals, "Honor your god," "Help your friends," and "Adorn your city," were held in high esteem by the Athenians. But in 86 B.C., Athens was sacked by the Romans. Most of the beautiful buildings for which Athens was famous were destroyed. By the time of Paul's visit, the city was vainly trying to regain its former glory. But philosophy and the arts were in decline. Athenians were trying to live in the glories of the past, as many of the formerly great countries of the world are doing today.

As he toured this city of the living dead, Paul's spirit was "provoked" when he observed the thousands of idols. Historians tell us that there were over 30,000 statues within the city proper. Paul knew that behind the art, the beauty the gold, the silver and the marble was something much more deadly--behind them was idolatry, immorality and captivity. One commentator writes, "The gods of Athens provided man no moral code, only a reason for the whims of his fate. The gods offered no reward for virtue, and shrugged at sin. But the gods reacted furiously to presumptuous pride, so the Greek sought to woo the gods' favor towards oaths, marriage and business by ritual and sacrifice." Paul saw beyond the idolatry to the hunger of men to worship, but to worship falsely and futilely. Writing from Corinth a few years later, Paul identifies the error of man's worship:

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. (Rom. 1:21)

Demon worship was what was behind the idolatry of the Athenians and the Corinthians, Paul says in 1 Cor. 10. No wonder his spirit was provoked within him as he walked around this city of Athens. These people had bought a lie, and in so doing they were experiencing the wrath of God. Paul's heart was broken because he knew that God had given them over in the lust of their hearts to impurity, to depraved passions and depraved minds. I was reminded of this in Paris a couple of years ago. I was sitting at a table of a sidewalk cafe, watching the passing parade of hundreds of Parisians whose eyes were empty, who were breathing but not living, people whose gods were materialism, intellectualism and science. These people were worshipping the gods of their own minds; they were worshipping the glories of the past.

As he toured the city of Athens, Paul had a choice to make. He could sit around and remain provoked, or he could move out in the Spirit and trust God to change the people of this city from worshipping demons to worshipping the Living God. The apostle went into action right away and started dialoging and reasoning in three different locations. First, he went to the synagogue, which was his custom, and shared from the Scriptures about Jesus the Messiah. When Paul shared about the fact that Jesus died for the sins of mankind, rose again from the dead, and was now available to live in the hearts of all who repented of their sins and believed on him, and then asked, "What do you think of that?" the Jews would kick him out of the synagogue; for them, there wasn't a lot of excitement about that message.

So then Paul began to hit the market places every day and reason with whoever he found there. One of the

things I love most about Europe is the fact that there are everywhere these wonderful market places, where strangers can meet to talk and reason together. If you join in, you are regarded as just one more person; you can jump right into whatever topic is being discussed. It's just a shame we don't have market places over here. If you talk to somebody in one of our shopping centers they think you're an undercover cop. We're so suspicious nobody wants to talk to anybody. You will see hordes of people in these shopping centers but you will never see anybody strike up a conversation with someone and begin to reason with him. If you talk to someone it really throws him. But not in Europe. In one such market place in Greece one evening I heard a lot of shouting and arguing going on among a group of people. I went over to a police officer and asked, "What's going on? Are they having a riot?" "No," he said, "they're talking about football!" They're not afraid to dispute and discuss anything over there. So that's where Paul went, to the market place. There people could haggle and talk. There they could buy slave girls or water clocks, witnesses for a trial or for lawsuits against their best friends. Paul went down to the cafes and reasoned with people about the Lord.

Then third, Paul went into the porches and the gardens of Athens and picked up on the philosophers, the Epicureans and the Stoics. The Epicureans are the spiritual fathers of all our modern self-help, self-realization groups. The Epicurean philosophy was to avoid pain at all costs. They didn't even want to think about a God who would judge them for their evil ways, so they crossed all thought of that out of their minds. For them, truth came through experience. Today's Epicureans agree with that. "If it feels good, do it," they say "All truth is within me." That philosophy insinuates itself into the church, too. "I know what the Scripture says, but I've had this experience. . ." "Don't confuse me with the Word. Let's talk about our experiences."

The Stoics were pantheists; they covered every base. They were proud, arrogant, independent, and very selfish. They taught that all truth was objective. They observed from a distance everything that happened, refusing to get involved. If they determined objectively, without participating, that something was truth, then it was so. That too has crept into the church: "Yes, that was a good sermon." "What did it do for you?" "Nothing. I think it was a good sermon, that's all. Why was it supposed to relate to me. Am I to do something?" These people think if they have to get involved, then it is not a good experiment. To watch it happen is fine, but don't get involved. All philosophy has been stuck at this point ever since.

But the apostle Paul now cruises in and faces these Epicureans and Stoics with a third way, not subjective or objective truth, but truth by revelation, the truth that Jesus Christ came among us and said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No man comes to the Father but by me." There were three results from all this reasoning in the marketplace. First, there was sarcasm. "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" some of the philosophers wondered. These men would sit waiting for new people to come to town, wondering "What does this little crumb gatherer have to say?" How would you like to walk into a group like that? "Hi, sparrow. What do you have to say?" The second reaction was that some were curious. They said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities" (the word is demons). Paul was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. He had an exciting revelation, and it was hard to shut him up. He verbalizes his revelation in his letter to the Colossians:

I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (Col. 1:25)

No Epicurean, no Stoic could ever have found that, because that knowledge came by revelation.

The third reaction was that Paul was invited to the Areo pagus, to share "this new teaching which you are proclaiming." This was where the city fathers, the supreme court, met. The life of the city revolved around this place where Paul was now going to share about Jesus Christ.

2. Witnessing In The Supreme Court (Acts 17:22-23)

a. Paul Captures Their Attention 22,23

And Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. 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.' What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you."

The Areopagus, the Hill of Mars, is situated on one side of the Acropolis. I have seen this small rock, which I think probably symbolized the center of the city, the court system. There probably was a forum or park just below it where Paul delivered his message.

"Men of Athens," Paul said, "I have observed three things since I arrived in your city. First, you are very religious in all respects. You worship thousands of gods. You are religious, there's no doubt about it. In fact, you're superstitious. You really fear these gods. You believe they're out to get you so you try to placate them, to woo them and appease them. Second, I've examined the objects of your worship and found that you've poured your time, your money and your energy into them. I sense your religious instincts and your desire to worship gods. And third, I found an idol to an unknown god," Paul told the Athenians. About 600 years before this, a plague had struck Athens. Epimenides, the poet, suggested that a flock of black and white sheep be released at Mars Hill, and each time a sheep sat in front of an idol, the sheep was to be slain and that god worshiped. But if a sheep sat down and there was no idol in front of it, the people were to quickly erect a god who would be called the Unknown God. "You Athenians worship in ignorance," Paul told them. "You will never come to a knowledge of the truth. I know this unknown God. If you listen to me, your search is over. I want to share him with you; I want to tell you who he is." Do you see Paul's tremendous insight here? Here was a man who understood and loved people. He knew that Jesus Christ could change their lives, therefore he sought ways to get their attention to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ.

b. Paul Reveals The Unknown God 17:24-31

The apostle now begins to gather in his own mind truths about the character of God as revealed to the Old Testament prophets to show the Athenians that they are ignorant of the only true God. First, he says, God is the Creator. Verses 24-25:

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; neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things. . .

This God created everything in the world, including man, Paul says. He is Lord of heaven and earth, therefore he cannot be controlled by man. "Why did you think you could put God in a temple made with hands," Paul asks. God is not served by human hands. He doesn't need anything from man, because he is the One who "gives to all life and breath and all things." God is a giver, not a taker, Paul tells them. The Athenians had invented a god and then wondered how he should be appeased. But they had missed the whole point. God doesn't want to be appeased, he wants to give life and breath. How many religions are there around today based on what man can do to please God? Paul's word to the Athenians cut across all the philosophies and religions of that day, and it still cuts across all the philosophies and religions of our day.

Second, Paul says, our God is sovereign. Verse 26:

and He made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation. . .

Not only did God create man, Paul says, but out of one man he created the nations which populate the face of the earth; and he appointed their times and their boundaries also. Paul is saying that God is in absolute control of every nation and every boundary, and we can rest in his sovereignty.

Why is God doing all this? Why did he give the nations their appointed times and why did he give them boundaries? Because God is redemptive, verse 27 tells us,

. . . that they should seek God [that is the reason], if perhaps they might grope for Him

and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist. . .

Man is not complete until he is filled by God

Paul tells the Athenians that God appointed them to live in that nation so that they might come to know him--which Paul was helping them to do right then and there. God is not far away, he tells the Athenians, "for in him we live and move and exist." That is how close God is, Paul says. Don't go looking for him; he has found you and wants to give you life. The other day a boy said to me, "I can't seem to find God." I asked him, "Did you ever ask God to reveal himself?" "No," he said, "I never did." "Well," I said, "just ask him. He will do it." God is very good at revealing himself. Last week I watched a TV program about the life of some monks in a monastery. All of them said, "We're here to seek God." I thought to myself, "Why are they seeking? God is easy to find. You don't have to go to a monastery to find him."

Finally, Paul says, God is our Father. Verses 28, 29:

. . . as even some of your own poets have said, "For we also are His offspring." Being then the offspring 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.

Man is created in the image of God. He is not complete until God fills him. Man's personality, intelligence, creativity, desire for companionship, his desire to relate to God, his zest for life, his dominion over life, all come from God. Paul is saying that even one of their own poets caught on to that. God is our Father and we are his sons. Do you think that his divine nature came from an image formed by man? Paul asks. These things never produced anything. The God who is alive has, and he is your Father, Paul tells them.

Paul concludes with an invitation. Verses 30, 31:

Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, 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.

Paul tells the Athenians there was a time of ignorance when they could do just about what they wanted to do. They could ignore God; they could imagine all kinds of things about God. But that time is over, Paul says. "I am here as a messenger from God to tell you that he wants you to repent of your sins," Paul says, "because although this God loves you he is also a righteous Judge. He has appointed a Man, his Son Jesus Christ, not a god of stone, but a Man who came and walked among us and died for us, and this Man will come again and judge all rebellion against God. But you Athenians don't have to face him as judge, you can face him as Lord and Savior, because God raised him from the dead," Paul says, " 'For there is no other name given among men whereby men must be saved.' "

3. The Fruit Of Witnessing Acts 17 :32-34

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this." So Paul went out of their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also was Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Some sneered, some said, "We'll hear you again," but some believed--a judge, a woman, and some men. The truth had been preached in Athens. The fruit of the Spirit had broken through the idolatry of that nation.

We are living in the age of the Spirit. God has empowered us by the Holy Spirit to break down strongholds of idolatry and false philosophy. The Holy Spirit gives us courage to witness about who Jesus is, and how he relates to our lives. In these times we should keep one foot in the Word of God and one foot in the world of God, because when we have one foot in the Word of God we have the mind of Christ to enable us to help people interpret and flee the false philosophies and idolatries of this nation. Show me where a man

places his time, his energy and his money and I will show you who his God is. Christians are to help set men and women free from these false gods. This year alone, five of my friends who worshiped at the feet of power, position, money and prestige all went belly up in times of crisis. Their gods failed to answer when these men called out in the night. Our message is that Jesus Christ is the only answer.

I greatly desire and hope that you will take and apply these words from the Book of Acts, understanding that Jesus was addressing believers in all ages when he said, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be of Me witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

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