



THE BEREAN PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

The Task of a Witness (1)

“The person and place of Jesus in the present pluralistic theological climate is still very much a contentious issue. The claims of Christ as the Son of God are currently widely disputed. In such an environment a brief must be presented, arguments advanced and defending witnesses brought forward, if the Christian case is to be given a proper hearing. To fail to present the evidence for the Christian position would be tantamount to conceding defeat to its opponents. That is to say, the controversy theme, so evident in the NT, appears to be highly pertinent to the missionary task of the church today.” - Allison A. Trites, “Witness,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3 (Zondervan, 1978), 1048

Article Postings

From the mid-1990s until the paper ceased publication in 2002, I wrote several articles for *First Century Christian* (edited by Grady Miller). I have recently begun posting some of them on my website. To date, the following have been added:

- *This Was “A Church of God”?*
- Reflections on the Idea of Restoration
- Corinth—Of Pride and Politics
- Who Is a Christian?

Click [here](#) to read/download.

Learning from a Preacher to Pluralists

David Anguish

Having been forced to flee Thessalonica and Berea by people who shared his Jewish heritage, what was Paul thinking as he entered Athens? The native city of Socrates and Plato and adopted home of Aristotle, Epicurus, and Stoicism’s founder Zeno, Athens was known for philosophy and learning, thus attracting adherents of many worldviews, including diverse religions and philosophies (cf. Acts 17).

Acts singles out two groups. The Epicureans “presented pleasure (*hedonē*) as the chief end of life, the pleasure most worth having being a life of tranquillity [sic], free from pain, disturbing passions, and superstitious fears.” The Stoics aimed to live consistently with nature, the highest expression of which was reason or design. They were pantheistic and as materialistic as the Epicureans. They emphasized reason over emotion and stressed individual self-sufficiency. They also believed it acceptable to commit suicide when life could no longer be supported with dignity.¹

These descriptions and things we know about other worldviews Acts did not highlight remind us of our current setting. So does the tendency of many in the culture to view Christian teaching as out of touch with the enlightened sophistication of the learned and knowing (cf. Acts 17.18, 32). To persuade people about Jesus in such a climate was a formidable challenge. But, as suggested previously ([Issue 2, 2](#)), Paul saw an opportunity, not a threat, and thus set out to reason with the Athenians in the marketplace of ideas (17.17).

How did he do it? A comparison of his sermon in Acts 17 with the one he presented in the Jewish synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13.16-41) is enlightening. In the synagogue, he assumed and built on presuppositions he shared with his hearers. Beginning with those ideas in Athens would have been futile. But that didn’t mean Paul could find no common ground with the Athenians who also believed in the existence

The Task of a Witness (2)

“The [twenty-first] century Christian witness in confronting contemporary paganism, especially in the western world, will find it necessary to expose erroneous ideas for what they are. He must remove obstacles which lie in the way of people’s accepting the truth—false beliefs about God, for example. He must not try to accommodate the gospel to his hearers’ or readers’ preconceptions, for all his endeavour to present it in an idiom which they understand. He will, however, be vigilant to seize upon every appropriate point of contact. Anything that rings a bell in his hearers’ mind may serve, for their minds are full of questions and aspirations—sometimes only half-consciously realized—to which the answer and fulfillment are provided by the gospel.” — F. F. Bruce, *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Eerdmans, 1977), 49

A Reminder

My book of sermons on worship—*The Glory Due His Name*—is available as a free pdf download for Berea Page readers through the end of 2020. Click [here](#), complete the Digital Publications Order Form on the page, and use the **Coupon Code “BP2020”** in the box at the bottom of the form. Click submit and I’ll email you a link to download the book.

“If I allow my own limited experience to be the measure of all things, I will surely cut reality down to my size.” - Colin Brown, *History and Faith: A Personal Exploration* (Zondervan, 1987), 46

of the divine (17.23) and had in their heritage true thoughts about deity that he could bring to bear (v. 28). Thus, Paul had an opening to begin his argument for Jesus and resurrection.

And Jesus and resurrection—the core idea both Paul and his preaching predecessors had taught when reasoning among the Jews (Acts 17.2-4; cf. 2.24, 32; 3.15, 26; 4.10; 10.40; 13.22, 30-37)—was the message he kept at the center of his teaching in Athens (17.18, 31-32). Whatever else he brought to his presentation, he stayed focused on that fundamental truth.

Learning from Paul

As we think about declaring Jesus and resurrection now, consider some things we can learn from Paul’s experience. First, although it may not always seem so, our world also includes people who are searching for truth (cf. Acts 17.34), people to whom the genuine teaching will appeal—if we are “wise as serpents” (Matt 10.16) in our efforts to declare it.

Second, our culture of pluralism can be an opportunity. While true that, unlike the first century situation, Christianity is not a new religion seeking a hearing, many now do not know even its basic teachings. But since many also “spend their time . . . telling or hearing something new” (Acts 17.21), what might happen if, like Paul, we find a way to say, “what you most want to know, we can show you” (cf. v. 23)?

Will customary methods be the most effective ways to share the message? Will the body of knowledge and counter-arguments we’ve accumulated speak to people where they are now? In some cases, perhaps. But often, we will need to study more broadly and deeply about other ideas and ways of communicating—while also focusing on other parts of the biblical story that might better speak to our culture—and seek to creatively reach the world as it now is. And the more we can draw on the talents and resourcefulness of a wider group of body members to do this, the better (cf. Rom 12.4-5; 1 Cor 12.14-31; Eph 4.11-16).

Finally—and most importantly!—we must be sure that, whatever methods we use, we don’t fail to present the fundamental message of Jesus and resurrection.

www.davidanguish.com

Notes

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, Third Revised and Enlarged Edition (Eerdmans, 1990), 376-377.

All Scripture quotations not otherwise designated are from the ESV. Permission is granted to reprint original materials with the credit line, “Reprinted from David Anguish, ‘The Berea Page,’ December 8, 2020.