



Cultural Apologetics

Jonathan Dodson | Acts 17:16-34 | February 3, 2020

The questions Austinites ask about Christianity have changed over the last decade. When I first arrived, people used to ask about the reliability of the Bible, the resurrection, essentially asking: Is Christianity *true*? Now people ask more about race, gender, sexuality, essentially: Is Christianity *good*? I believe Christianity is not only good but also true, and in fact if it's not true *it can't be good*. It's good because it's true. You know what else is true? *Christians* aren't always a good reflection of Christ. We'll need to take that into account. Over the next 8 weeks we'll take up a key cultural question and put it to, not personal opinion, but what Scripture says is true. You may not like some of the answers, but I hope you'll see God is wise enough to occasionally disagree with us. Our hope is this series will not just give you answers but guide you in engaging *others* with similar questions. That's why we're starting here today. In Acts 17, Luke who arranged the book gives us one of Paul's many sermons, and places it here not just to do history but to show us *how to do theology*, how to respond to cultural claims: 3 essentials of wise, winsome cultural engagement: Affirm, Confront, Redeem (ARC).

Affirm the Good and True

The story occurs in Athens, a city that was a beacon of philosophical thought. As you entered the city you'd see: sculptures, stunning architecture, a library, marketplace, a zoo, and lots of people. City streets were lined with statues of men and gods. Athens especially decorated with the Hermes, the son of Zeus, god of eloquent speech. **Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols** (16). Walking the city, Paul's spirit is *provoked*. The word means "to arouse, to sharpen" often an emotion such as anger or grief. When some Christians see the idols of their city they're provoked to self-righteous anger, pouncing on opposing views as Flannery O'Conner described, "*with Jesus hidden in their head like a stinger.*" Ready to injure and to maim in the name of Jesus. Others are provoked to despair, the culture's getting so bad, and they withdraw, become indifferent. But notice how *Paul* is provoked. **He reasoned with them**. He did not name-call; in fact, he is called names, Babblers, birdbrain. But does not trade insults. He responds, not with emotion (tho he *felt* a great deal) but with *reason*. The

word διαλέγομαι means to engage in speech, to converse, to exchange views. He listened and weighed their words, reflected and responded. And does it in multiple contexts: synagogue (religious square), the agora/market (public square), and the Areopagus (academy). So wherever we find ourselves, Paul sets us an example. The first thing he does when engaging cultural questions is to **affirm** *what's good and true*. This may not be your natural impulse. It's often not mine. But Paul's *first* response is to *find common ground with the culture*. He says, "I perceive that in every way you are very religious" (=devout, 22). I observed your objects of worship. Instead of putting them down, he praises what's good. What good does he find?—an impulse to seek God, to worship, spiritual hunger. MM What truth does he find? Citing their literary and philosophical leaders. Epimenides and Aratus who both defended immortality and power of Zeus. Epimenides says: They fashioned a tomb for you, high and holy one, but they are liars; you are not dead you live and abide forever, for In him we live and move and have our being. Aratus talks about Zeus being everywhere and how we are indebted to him, for we are indeed his offspring. What's true? The true Creator God is immortal, all powerful, and omnipresent. The first way to respond to issues and idols is enter into a dialog with culture and discover *what's good and true*. So when we go to the movies, read a book, sit down with a friend, interact with a coworker ask yourself, What can I in good conscience and with theological integrity affirm? I've been reading a novel by William Gibson, once described as "*probably the most important novelist of the past two decades*." His work in science fiction has influenced fashion, tech, films like the Matrix, and coined the term *cyberspace*. He has some questionable material. But despite all that his work seems to have a certain respect for humanity, like it's less about the sci-fi and more about us. In an interview he was asked about his own spirituality and he said, If anyone tells me they are spiritual, I tend to look at how they're treating other people. Is that *good*? Absolutely. He upholds good treatment of others. But is it *true*? Yes, even if he doesn't realize it he's restating the second greatest command of Jesus, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Now that's something we need to work on. *Affirm what's good and true*. Last year a father with young children asked me if he should celebrate Halloween, a holiday with ties to the occult. He was thinking of silently protesting it. I suggested he look for the good. What are his neighborhood trick-or-treaters looking for? Demonic power or good

times and candy? Get out there and focus on the good. Affirm what's good and true. Now what about what's false, harmful?

Confront What's False and Harmful

Affirm what's good and true. Second, Paul confronts what's *false and harmful*. Standing in the Areopagus, a hill where ideas were debated, Paul says “**For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything,** (23–25). What's he doing? He affirms their devotion to an unknown god. What does he confront? The prevailing notion of the gods: that they lived in temples and required human service. Shocking and offensive. Why? Well, to be a true Greek citizen was to visit temples and shrines regularly: feed the gods with offerings, honor them with prayers. In fact, participating in festivals, communal meals, loud prayers was so normative it made the individual a part of the community. To abstain was to be strange, *undevoted*. He challenges what they consider sacred. We live in an equally devout society, but our mark of devotion isn't attention to temples but to *the Self*. To question the Self (its expression, desires, thoughts) is an act of heresy. If a person declares themselves a this or that it is anathema to challenge it, even if its untrue. Paul is confronting what Stott describes as “**the attempt to localize God and confine him within our limits.**” The Greeks drew lines around where the God dwelt and attached it with particular significance: god of eloquence here. We do the same localizing god, not in shrines but in ourselves. We locate God within the Self, what philosopher Charles Taylor describes as our golden, inner Statue. But Paul says, the Lord of heaven and earth does not live in temples to be helped out by humans as though he needs anything. The true God is not confined to our boxes or limited by our self-expression. He transcends them. *He* draws the limitations and the boundaries. Paul appeals to the *aseity* of God. Aseity means “a state of being by itself.” The true God exists, not as a handmaiden to our whims, *but in a state of being all unto himself*, what German scholar Rudolf Otto described as the *Mysterium Tremendum*, something so great it makes you tremble, even hide. Paul confronts what's *false*: we cannot localize and limit God. He is the *mysterium*

tremendum. But Paul also confronts what's *harmful*. If all these idols and little selves aren't the true God, then promoting them is at *least* a fool's errand (29), but *worse* it puts us under harm's way: [The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed](#)" (30). To face the righteous judgement of the *mysterium tremendum* will be an awful thing. It is harmful to worship any other god. Back to Gibson, telling people true spirituality is how you treat other people is not good enough. True spirituality is how you treat God *himself*, the greatest commandment: love the Lord your God with all you heart, mind, soul and strength. Confront what's false and harmful.

Redeem with Person and Work of Christ

Affirm what's good and true, confront what's false and harmful, and finally *redeem with the person and work of Christ*. Deep down, everybody wants redemption. We know something is off. We know we aren't whole, the world is broken. It's why we long for the movie to end with the central character doing the right thing. We want a redemptive arc. The question is how do we get it? Paul responds to the Greeks by ["preaching Jesus and the resurrection](#) (18). Now all Greek philosophers believed resurrection was impossible. For them, death was an unconquerable sorrow. Seneca the Stoic sought to banish *"the dread of death shared by every human being."* Typical burial inscriptions read, *"No one who has died rises up from here."* But Paul tells them a story about [a man who will judge the world one day in righteousness, a man who first dies and rises from the dead](#) (31). *That changes things:* because if it's true there's a man who conquers death, *he takes away the fear of death in his own death*. Here we have the height of spirituality. Look how Jesus treats other people: he takes their sorrow, their death—and is judged early in their place—to fulfill their deep down desire for redemption. The God we try to limit, imposes the limits of flesh and blood on himself, is located on a Roman cross for our silly grabs at his aseity. Jesus conquers the unconquerable sorrow. In him desire is fulfilled and redemption applied! Jesus redeems. True spirituality isn't just how we treat people, or even how we treat God, but how God treats us. The cross shows us he is just and merciful. As we engage culture let's be just and



merciful: *affirm* what's good and true, *confront* what's false and harmful, and *redeem* with the person and work of Jesus.