

Sermon Overview

Title: The Pursuits of a Passionate Church, Part I

By: Revd. Mike Breen

Text: Acts 17:16-34, John 4:35

Topic: Paul sharing the message of the Gospel in Athens

Big Idea: In order to be effective change agents in our world today, one of the fundamental skills that we need to develop is to effectively study the culture around us as we prepare to communicate the Gospel.

Preparation

This sermon forms part of a two part series on Paul's approach to reaching a community with the message of the Gospel of Christ.

Sermon Outline

Introduction

Today we are faced with incredible opportunities to reach out to the world around us. Yet anyone who has a desire to be used by God in our emerging culture needs to develop three fundamental skills:

1. We need to build a passionate church that will communicate authentic community to a broken society.
2. We need to read the Bible, reminding ourselves of the vision of God's Kingdom on earth and the values of a covenant relationship given by God's grace.
3. We need to study our culture; for it is in seeing what is happening in our culture that we discover the best way to communicate the message of the Gospel. This is not a new idea. In Acts 17 the apostle Paul was a careful observer of the culture of Athens as he prepared to speak to the Athenian people.

Paul in Europe

Paul travels from Philippi (where Paul is opposed, imprisoned, then escorted from the city) to Thessalonica. In Thessalonica Paul found some good reception to the word he shared, but still met with strong opposition. From there Paul went to Berea in the hills where there was a good reception to the gospel. However those who opposed Paul in Thessalonica followed him to Berea and stirred up trouble for him to such an extent that he had to leave. The believers in Berea escorted Paul to the coast where he set sail to Athens.

Upon arrival in the harbour city Piraeus, Paul saw the obvious articulation of a great culture – artifacts, sculptures and sacred temples that lined the road to the great western gate of Athens. All of this beauty, the production of sculptures and great architecture communicated something very important to a careful observer like Paul: He wanted to share the message of Jesus

wherever he went, but learned that in order to say something, you first need to begin to see something. Seeing comes before saying.

Seeing and Saying: 1st Century

In Athens, Paul saw a world full of artifacts and shapes and images that told him something.

- **Sculptures** - The sculptures communicated that the Athenians were totally captivated by the human form, by sexuality and what they saw represented beauty.
- **Worship Artifacts** – Much of what was produced was worshipped. Only Rome had more places of worship than Athens. There was a god that covered every hope and aspiration for every season of life.

(Anthropologists call these the *cultural artifacts of society*)

Paul looked around the city and through his observation, was able to discern and teach something important. This is a fundamental skill that the Lord wants to teach us – to look deeply, observe correctly in order to see beyond the surface so that we can say something of significance.

What are the cultural artifacts of our culture?

Seeing and Saying: 21st Century

- In Biblical times when Jesus quoted from the Old Testament (as he did while on the cross) the listeners would hear the quote and be able to continue that scripture all the way through the chapter perhaps even the whole book.
- We are now more of a visual culture. We reference a lot of information through images (Mike Breen uses the image of Mickey Mouse as an example. Use this or another image more appropriate to your setting to illustrate the point).

21st Century Cultural Artifacts

The TV

- The stories presented on television depict many truths about society.
- In the past, TV sitcoms focused on family units. (Examples include “The Cosby Show,” “Family Ties,” and “Full House.” Throughout the 90’s, number one shows are “Friends,” “Seinfeld,” etc. Through television patterns, we see the cultural shift to friendship not family life as the place of relational security.
- Hit shows like “Will and Grace,” “Sex in the City,” and “Desperate Housewives,” are reflections of emerging cultural views.

The Car

- The car communicates that people love independence, their own personal space shaped to meet their needs and express their personality.
- For some the car communicates style; for others sex appeal, others still family life.

The Internet

The Internet communicates four things -

- **Networking** – Neighborhoods no longer function as they used to. Community life functions across networks.
- **Independence** – We are called to interdependence, where we are equally dependent on God.
- **Freedom from Control** – Our culture desperately wants freedom from control, yet desperately needs accountability.
- **Anonymity** - Anonymity leads to isolation and ultimately death. The greatest single cause of death amongst single young men under 25 is suicide. We need to find a way to build community.

The need for a “Meta Narrative” – a story

Music

- Previous generations shared a common identity, experience and history (e.g. the generation of Americans who experienced World War II together).
- The emerging culture does not have the same connecting story and so lacks a sense of identity, and consequently they lack a sense of security.
- Music genres that present the story in song (e.g. the ballad, the hip hop scene) have resurfaced and have become the mainstream in popular music. People have adopted these stories as their own.
- People need a story – but the greatest story is the story of salvation.
- Telling your story – testimony – is the most powerful story you can tell.

Movies

(During this part of the sermon, film trailers were used to introduce the films that Mike Breen refers to)

Many films say what are in the hearts of the people that watch them:

- **The Matrix Trilogy**
- **Moulin Rouge**
- **The Blair Witch Project**
- **The Return of the King**

Conclusion

The passionate church needs to look carefully at the world we are in – the hopes, fears and longings of the emerging culture. Open your eyes and carefully observe the world around you so that you can learn to say more effectively the message of the Gospel that lives in your heart.

Response

How can the conclusion of your service facilitate a response to those who are challenged by the sermon?

Would it be appropriate to conclude with prayer, time to reflect, worship?