

# Athens Approach

## Introduction

Have you noticed, especially recently, how *bad* we seem to be at talking to each other? As a culture, it's easier than ever to become entrenched in our own beliefs about something, shutting our ears, and living in an echo chamber.

There's a greek word used 13 times in the New Testament: διαλέγομαι (dialegomai), which has an interesting translation. Sometimes it has a negative meaning when it's translated as "argue" (Mark 9:34) or "dispute" (Acts 24:12). Other times it seems positive when it's most commonly translated "reasoned" (Acts 17:2, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8, 9; 24:25) or "talked" (Acts 20:7, 9). And you can hear our English word "dialogue" in it.

Living in a culture that's so deeply entrenched in sin:

- How can we take the message of Christ to a world that *seems* to have already made up their minds about it?
- What kind of approach should we take with those who don't yet know about the Lord?
- How can we reason with them to leave their worldly pursuits and start following Christ?

Paul's interaction with some Athenian philosophers in Acts 17 might help answer these questions.

## Care (Get Bothered)

*"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" (Acts 17:16).*

Rather than being numb to sin, Paul was softhearted enough to let it bother him. But looking around at the world today, it's increasingly difficult to stay sensitive to the "sin problem" all around us. If we're not careful, we can easily start to normalize sins like lying, arrogance, sexual immorality, divisiveness, and stealing.

But God loved the world enough — in spite of our sinfulness — to send his son to die (John 3:16). And unless we love others with that kind of intensity, being willing to commit ourselves to helping, we'll just quietly sit on the sidelines and never say what the world desperately needs to hear.

So, let's ask ourselves:

- *Are you provoked by sin today?*
- *Does it bother you enough to speak out about it?*
- *How much effort would your love motivate you to spend for the lost?*

## Curiosity (Perceive / Observe)

*"So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.' ...'" (Acts 17:22–23).*

We often paint with a broad brush, applying labels to people without much thought. Rather than writing them off, Paul wanted to understand them. What made them tick? What was the "hook" he could use to get them to listen? It took a certain amount of curiosity and perceptiveness on Paul's part.

We'll never sympathize with people until we see them and understand them. In a sense, isn't that what God did by sending Jesus to live as a man? "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). He connected with us, experienced life like we do, and is able to sympathize with us.

So, let's ask ourselves:

- *Are you curious about the lost of this world?*
- *Are you writing people off before really getting to know them?*
- *When was the last time you actively listened to someone you disagreed with?*

### **Connect (Acknowledge / Complement)**

*"Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious" (Acts 17:22).*

Notice how complementary Paul is. He finds common ground and connects with them about their religious practices. *"You're religious, and so am I!"* He's not on the attack, but incredibly respectful of their existing beliefs. How do you think they would have responded if he started blasting them for their idolatry? Instead, he realized this particular sin was a symptom of a greater problem — their lack of connection to the True God!

Reasoning with people is a two-way street — give and take. And maybe nothing turns people off faster than being talked down to. But we're no better off, since we've all sinned (Rom. 3:23). It's not about being insincere either, but genuinely acknowledging the good in people while courageously addressing the bad. And we can only really acknowledge the good if we've first been **curious** enough to learn about them.

So, let's ask ourselves:

- *Are you humble and sincere in your approach? Have you identified what you have in common with someone who's lost?*
- *Do they feel like you're on the attack when sharing your faith, or do they feel seen and acknowledged?*

### **Correct (Teach / Say What Needs to Be Said)**

"... *What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you*" (Acts 17:23).

All this concern, curiosity, and the connection was leading somewhere — speaking up to correct their misunderstandings! And Paul's message was simple, addressing their specific problem with idolatry quite nicely:

- God is the Lord of this world (Acts 17:24-25).
- Man is God's creation (Acts 17:26-27).
- God and man are related (Acts 17:28-29).
- The conclusion: Abandon your ignorant rituals and repent (Acts 17:30-31)!

If we never say the hard thing, appropriate for the context, we've missed it all. Point them to Jesus and a better understanding of God. The solution for the world's sins aren't social programs, legislation, or stricter government regulations — it's Jesus! Only when the world understands who God is, will they finally be compelled to change.

So, let's ask ourselves:

- *Are you taking the most important step of speaking up?*
- *Is the message simple enough for them to understand?*
- *Are you focussing on Jesus or merely trying to correct their sinful nature?*

## Conclusion

At the end of the day, their reaction to Paul's message was mixed.

*"Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them" (Acts 17:32-34).*

Don't get discouraged by their response. It's not your job to convert, only to plant the seed and apply the water (1 Cor. 3:6)! And make sure your planting and watering is done in the most effective way possible, by:

- **Caring** about people's sinful condition
- Being **curious** enough to find out how to help
- **Connecting** with them by finding common ground
- And courageously **correcting** them with God's word