

Preaching among idolatrous hipsters? Study Paul.

In Athens, the apostle bears witness—and doesn't try to be cool.

by [Anna Carter Florence](#) in the [September 28, 2016](#) issue



Anonymous, Paulus in Athens, oil on canvas, 19th century.

They called him a babbler. It wasn't a compliment, either: *spermalogos*, which isn't quite what it sounds like in English, but almost. Seed picker. Word scrapper. Someone who spouts childish, raggedy nonsense and, worse, profits from it. A gossip columnist, say, or the blogger who posts nothing but recycled chatter. The person you delete from your Twitter account when you've had enough foolishness.

"What does this babbler want to say?!" the Athenians muttered about Paul, and Paul must have known he was in trouble. This audience was not going to be like the others he'd encountered on his missionary journeys. This one was going to take some thought. How do you proclaim good news in a city filled with students, a city obsessed with all things new? How do you preach in Athens?

Before his arrival in Athens, Paul's track record as a preacher wasn't bad. At least he'd always made an impression, thrilling the faithful, disturbing the authorities, and getting arrested, beaten, and thrown out of town. Simply put, Paul was a preacher who turned heads, and his preaching usually led to first the founding of a small band of believers and second the disgruntlement of everyone else.

His general practice, when entering a new city, was to make his way to the synagogue, set up camp, and immediately begin to argue about the scriptures with anyone who happened to be there. He argued in Corinth, he argued in Ephesus. And he was good at it—really good. Paul was a lawyer; he could argue for three weeks without stopping, if necessary, and sometimes did. It was a homiletical tactic that worked for him, or at least came naturally. And if sometimes the citizens of a place tired of it, as happened in Thessalonica around the time our story begins, if they decided that his arguments were offensive and his presence no longer welcome—well, Paul was used to that, too. He knew how to leave town in a hurry if he had to. He knew how to shake the dust from his feet and move on to the next place.

Originally, that was all Athens was supposed to be: the next place. Paul's visit to Thessalonica and environs had ended rather abruptly when a group of angry citizens began hunting for him throughout the countryside; obviously, it was time to go, and fast. Escorts led Paul to the coast and took him as far as Athens, where angry Thessalonians might not think to look and where a preacher could presumably blend into the lively atmosphere of teachers and philosophers. In Athens Paul could wait for Timothy and Silas, his companions, to catch up with him. In Athens he could get his bearings and figure out what was next.

But Athens was different. Athens struck Paul in a way no city ever had before. It was all the idols; he walked around, the text says, and his spirit was deeply disturbed to see that the Athenians had so many of them. There were idols, or statues, to the gods of beauty and youth, the gods of wisdom and intellect, the gods of wine and war, the gods of light and hearth and sea and fire. Every human need and craving and desire and skill was manifest in a physical representation that Paul could see only as idolatrous. It provoked him to his core. It sent him stomping to the synagogue and the marketplace to argue with the Athenians about it.

And as anyone but Paul might have predicted, his arguments fell flat. You cannot preach to people you have just met when you are already furious with them. You cannot offer good news and a scathing lifestyle critique at the same time, particularly if you have just arrived in a place. It makes your sermon sound like ranting and raving or, as the Athenians helpfully suggested, like babbling nonsense. And babblers are easily dismissed.

Athens was different. It was ancient and hip and artsy and fascinated by what's next, and it was the first city to offer Paul a real homiletical challenge. Even he could see that if he didn't change tactics, he was going to miss the narrow window of attention the Athenians always offered the new person or idea in town. Arguing wouldn't do it in Athens; the Athenians practically invented arguing. It wasn't anything new to them, and they would want to hear something new. So what to do with his sliver of time, when it came?

The first thing Paul did was to stop talking. He literally shut up, which is a useful thing for a preacher to do from time to time: be quiet and take stock of your surroundings. Do not assume that just because you know how to preach, everyone wants to hear you do it. Wait for an invitation. Know that this invitation might or might not be to a conventional pulpit: there are many forums for speech, and these vary from context to context. Perhaps you will be invited into a space that looks familiarly sacred with a pulpit you can easily identify. On the other hand, perhaps you won't, and if you cannot be watchful and creative about the space you are dealt, you are going to miss out. First, however, and most important, is the invitation. Do not speak until you are invited.

Paul had to think hard about this. It was not in his nature to hold back or to refrain from offering vocal opinions and explanations in any and all circumstances. Paul was charismatic to his very pores: he loved proclamation. But in Athens, he learned to wait, which was not a verb to which he gravitated but one God kept sending him, all the same. Wait, Paul. Wait for Silas and Timothy. Wait for the Athenians. Let them extend the invitation to speak to them in their own time and on their own turf.

When the invitation finally came, it was not for Paul to deliver the message at a local Greek temple on interfaith night. Instead, he was asked to appear at the Areopagus, the rocky hillside that had once functioned as an Athenian high court of law and where even the god Ares was said to have been tried. The Areopagus was not a temple but a popular spot for Athenians to hear and debate one another. It was also where they gathered to tell and hear something new: in this case, to hear Paul talk about his strangely fascinating foreign divinities.

Paul was astute enough to realize that this was his moment and he had better seize it. He could be offended by the fact that he was the latest curiosity, or he could take his 15 minutes of fame when it was offered. He could hold out for an idol-free environment, or he could set aside his own aversions and figure out how to preach in

the presence of statues that made his skin crawl. The invitation, when it comes, is often a thing that requires patience and adaptation as well as a healthy dose of restraint.

The second thing Paul did was to take a closer look at the Athenians themselves. First impressions are instructive but not always accurate; perhaps there is more to see than you originally thought. Perhaps your initial assessment of the Athenians as a godless, rudderless set of trend-sucking, ego-driven techno-junkies was a bit premature. Look again. Look slowly. Walk the streets and take your time. Stop at the coffee shop and start a conversation with the barista and the person sitting at the corner table. Ask about what they're working on, what they're thinking about. Ask for their recommendations about what you should see and do while you're in the neighborhood. Follow through on their suggestions. Expect to be surprised. Suspend judgment about this. Let wonder and delight speak; hold shock in check. Keep looking. When you begin to appreciate what you see, you will know you are paying attention at last. Take a deep breath and look again.

Paul was a keen observer, but an opinionated one. He had a hard time suspending judgment about what he saw (*Athens* = *idols*; *Athenians* = *idolatrous*), especially if it triggered in him some deeply held belief. In Athens, he was confronted by the most blatant violation of the second commandment that he had ever encountered: the sight of so many idols, so many graven images. It was practically blinding. He could hardly think straight, let alone see straight. And zooming in for a closer look? Who would want to?

Memory, however, is another sort of trigger, and every bit as powerful. One verb recalls another or sets in motion an experience that flickers just below the surface, and even the most opinionated moment is up for revision. Paul knew about mistaken first impressions. He knew about belief so ferocious that it required an intervention of blindness. His new life with Jesus started on the Damascus Road. And maybe it was this that gave him a special sensitivity to knee-jerk reactions whenever they appeared. Maybe it was this that allowed him to push past his inclination to smash those idols and instead to take another look at them.

What he saw was a kind of empty canvas: the statue to the unknown god, jammed in between the grander statues to the gods of love and sex and power and so forth. It was a small ache, a small openness to what might yet be out there, as if the Athenians were saying, *Even this glory cannot speak to every human need. Even we*

are still searching for something not yet revealed.

If Paul hadn't been paying close attention, he would have sailed right past it; if he hadn't been examining the idols with interest, he would have missed its significance. He would have gotten all caught up in the flashiness of machinery and technology, which are not, in the end, what display our humanity. If you want to know the pulse of a place, look at how it marks its own borders. Look for what it is yearning and searching for beyond those borders. Find its idols, and then find the one that is missing.

Don't just take a second look; take a second look at the very things that make you want to look away. Take a second look at the idols: the ones that repulse you most, the ones you love to hate, the ones that go against everything you stand for. Examine them closely, because in them you will find the opening. In them you will find the entry point to dialogue and conversation about our common human ache. And just so you know: those idols, the ones you scrutinize so carefully, will actually put your own into sharp relief. Another culture's statue to the unknown god will probably show you that you had one, too, all along.

The third thing Paul did was to put all this into words. It is one thing to have a stunning insight; it is quite another to summon the courage to say it out loud, in words that others will understand. Paul did both in his sermon. It is one of the few complete spoken texts of his that we have, and it is powerful to read. We can only imagine what it must have been like to hear.

Several things stand out. One is Paul's starting point: he begins not with himself, but with what he has seen—and not in Jerusalem or Damascus, either, but what he has seen in Athens, as a guest. He begins with a witness about the Athenians themselves. He describes a moment, while walking their streets and marketplaces and temples and meeting grounds, when he saw something intriguing: the statue to the unknown god. It lets the Athenians know that he has taken the time to really see them. It lets them know he has come with interest and appreciation rather than criticism. And it lets them know that he is a careful observer, and therefore someone to be trusted. A good witness is a good conversation partner. Paul establishes himself as a witness first, a witness in Athens.

He also establishes himself as a student of the Athenians' culture. He knows their literature; he quotes their poets. He can do it without stumbling over the words,

which tells us that he has not only read the work but absorbed it, understood it, and even appreciated it. He sticks with material that is appropriate to illustrate his point rather than material that crosses the line into extremely awkward territory. And most important: he seems to know that nothing is worse than preachers who try to pass for cooler or younger or more Athenian than they actually are. Nothing is worse than preachers who pretend that they are residents of a culture to which they are rightfully only witnesses. Paul gets it: you have to be authentic. You can observe, but you don't get to live there. So observe well; cite well. Don't be an embarrassment to yourself or the Athenians by trying to be someone you aren't.

There is a reason for all this observation and citation, however, and that is to find the moments of intersection between gospel and culture. Paul does this with the image of the unknown god. He does it carefully and respectfully. "I see you are very religious," he tells the Athenians. "I see it in your places of worship and I see it in this remarkable placeholder: the statue to an unknown god. So now I want to tell you where you and I meet, and it is in this very image! What you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you!"

This is the moment when Paul lets it rip, as it were. He doesn't hold back. He doesn't save anything for later. He tells the Athenians, as joyfully and simply as he can, that the god they have been searching for is the One who has come to us in Jesus Christ. He tells the story. He tells it as a witness who has seen and believed. And he lets God's verbs predominate: *God* is the One who has sent. *God* is the One who has raised from the dead. *God* is the One who has redeemed. It is all there, in plain sight, even in Athens. Paul makes it sound as if Christ himself is present and walking through the Areopagus with them—which, of course, Christ is.

The Athenians listen. Some of them are intrigued. Some of them scoff. Some want to hear more, later. Paul knows: this is as it should be. The gospel is scandalous to the ear and eye, and if preachers got a standing ovation with every sermon, they might forget exactly how scandalous it really is. They might begin to think that they themselves are the subject of the sermon, which they are not. God is the subject. Even in Athens, God is the subject. And telling the story is more important than smashing idols.

How do we proclaim good news to young adults who are on the margins of church or have left it or are waiting for the next thing? How do we proclaim good news in Athens?

We make a beginning. We find the empty plinth and that small placeholder of a statue. We put away our aversions and our arguments and uncork some joy, which always bubbles up when we tell the story. And we have a good story to tell! So tell it. Tell it as a joyful witness. Go to Athens, get to know some Athenians, and take it from there.

A version of this article appears in the September 28 print edition under the title "Paul's sermon prep." It is excerpted from Questions Preachers Ask: Essays in Honor of Thomas G. Long, edited by Scott Black Johnston, Ted A. Smith, and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, just published by Westminster John Knox. Used by permission.