

Acts 17:22–31

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. **23** For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. **24** The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, **25** nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. **26** From one ancestorⁱ he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, **27** so that they would search for God^j and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. **28** For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’

29 Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. **30** While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, **31** because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

1 Peter 3:13-22

13 Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? **14** But even if you do suffer for doing what is right,^[a] you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear,^[b] and do not be intimidated,¹⁵ but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you,¹⁶ yet do it with gentleness and respect. Maintain a good conscience so that, when you are maligned,^[c] those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. **17** For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil. **18** For Christ also suffered^[d] for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you^[e] to God. He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,¹⁹ in which also he went and made a proclamation to the

spirits in prison, ²⁰ who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight lives, were saved through water. ²¹ And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for ^[f] a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

In the early days of the church, the apostles faced a unique challenge. In America, we are generally sharing the gospel with atheists who deny any God, or perhaps agnostics who believe God is unknowable and thus not worth discussing. The apostles, however, faced a world in which other religions were very firmly established. Great temples and shrines to these gods peppered the landscape. Centuries before, a philosopher called Epimenides (Ep ah men ah dees) had been credited with saving Athens from a terrible plague, likely typhus or bubonic plague. Convinced that it was divine punishment from an unknown and displeased deity, Epimenides took a herd of sheep and starved them until they were very hungry and released them into a choice field. Most of the sheep immediately began to give the field a good haircut, but a few laid down for an unknown reason, probably because they were starved. The sheep who laid down were slaughtered and an altar to the unknown god was built where they lay. The plague released its grip on Athens, and the city was saved.

It is into this history that Paul steps. These people are not atheists, they are very religious to the point that they feared offending an unknown god. One might think it would be difficult if not impossible to share the gospel of the one true God in a city where it was said that there were more gods than men. But Paul was never one to keep quiet, even if sometimes we sort of wish he would. As Peter would later write, Christians were to always be ready to get a defense of their faith, with gentleness and reverence, and that is exactly what Paul does.

Paul makes his case logically, working backwards from this unknown god. He meets the people where they are at, and speaks respectfully. As a

result some people were saved, including influential residents, and others wanted to hear more. In fact, the impressive Greek parthenon you have probably seen in pictures stood not far from where Paul preached, but around 500 AD, it would be converted to a Christian church, and would remain Our Lady of Athens until the Ottomans captures Athens in 1458. Paul's calm defense was a part of this unlikely conversion.

Always be ready to make your defense with gentleness and reverence, Peter tells us. The modern church does not get an exception on this. We are all called to be prepared to give a defense of our faith.

Unfortunately, many modern christians are not prepared to give a defense. There are many barriers, such as fear or embarrassment, which prevent people from even getting started. Then Christians often confuse emotional pleas and dramatics for a calm defense. Finally, there are fewer and fewer apologists (people trained in defended the faith through Scripture, logic, and philosophy), and a complete lack of emphasis on apologetics and systematic theology in the seminaries and churches, systematic theology being a branch of theological study that tries to order and explain Christian theology in an orderly way without contradiction.

I certainly understand the fear and embarrassment. If you engage in the toxic wasteland that is social media, you will quickly find that Christianity is often mocked with snide remarks about how Christians believe in a virgin birth and a dead man being raised. Especially for the more orthodox among, our views and the way they shape our lives and opinion can be very unpopular. It's no secret that I consider myself to be orthodox in many ways, and that shapes how I lead my life, from the things I consider good to the way I spend my time even to the way that I vote. Christians often hold unpopular beliefs, and it is unfairly assumed this is out of ignorance or bigotry, when it is simply the teachings we've held for thousands of years, teachings people fought and died for.

But fear of being mocked or ostracized is no excuse for Peter, who tells us that if we suffer for doing what is right, we are blessed. Now, that does seem like a small consolation from our vantage point here on Earth. But I assure you, when the first day of eternity arrives, we will see our lives and the suffering we experienced as part of God's great plan, and we will not have it any other way. I know that may seem hard to believe, but so is Jesus rising from the dead, and if that is true, I can assure you the other is

as well. Always be ready to give a defense of your faith with gentleness and reverence, even if you're afraid or embarrassed.

The second barrier I mentioned earlier is that many Christians today confuse giving a defense with an emotional testimony and plea. You may have come across this before. I remember once when I lived in Florida I went to the beach as I did every weekend. A young man approached me and asked what would happen if I drowned out there in the ocean. As a side note, I can't swim so much as flop around and get myself to the side of the pool before drowning, so this was a reasonable possibility. I tried to cut him off at the pass with a "I'm a christian, thank you, have a nice day," but he went on, adding emotional plea after emotional plea about my soul and heaven and hell and trying to get me to commit to HIS flavor of Christianity. These pleas sometimes work, they sometimes illicit an emotional response and a quick sinners prayer, but rarely convert into a person living an intentionally christian life as part of a worshiping body. More often, the person shelves Christianity now that they've received their fire insurance.

We've all heard touching testimonies of people who had hit rock bottom and then found God. Sometimes, that is exactly what the unbeliever needs. They need the connection with a person on the brink of terrible choices and consequences that turns it all around by the grace of God. The problem is, however, that bad times don't tend to turn around very quick. While someone might have their heart warmed by a touching testimony, fear, doubt and suffering quickly creeps back in. They are still being abused, or addicted to harmful vices, or still homeless, or still feel like it is all meaningless. Satan does his best work when he asks us questions, and the questions come. If God is good, why am I hurting? If there really is a God, why is the world so messed up? Emotional pleas cannot answer these questions. Only the word of God and the reason God gave us can answer these questions. Always be ready to give a defense of your faith with gentleness and reverence, using the word of God and the reason God has blessed you with.

The third barrier I mentioned was a lack of great apologists and a lack of emphasis on apologetics and systematic theology in the church. Don't be confused by the word apologetics, while it might sound like we're to be apologizing for our faith, the opposite is true. Apologetics comes from the greek apologia which means to give a reasoned defense, and is the same root used in this passage from 1 Peter. The early church was known for

incredible apologists, such as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria. They defended the faith well and are frequently still referenced. Some of our modern challenges were not present then, though. Doctors still believed in humors and bleeding the sick, and many of our social moral challenges simply weren't present.

The modern era is not without its great apologists. CS Lewis was probably the greatest apologist of modern times, with important works such as *Mere Christianity* and *The Problem with Pain*. Others might include William Lane Craig or RC Sproul. These brilliant individuals make the case for Christianity in calm, respectful and logical terms. Many Christians today, however, are unfamiliar with apologetics and systematic theology and do not feel confident in their ability to give an answer for their faith. The result is what appears to be an incoherent faith that does not appeal to many and is easily dismissed. If you'd like to feel more confident in your ability to defend your faith, come see me! Start with *Mere Christianity*, and then we can figure out where to go from there.

The people of our culture who are not Christians have questions. How could a good God allow bad things to happen? Why is Christ the only way to heaven, what about people who never heard about Christ? Is the Bible reliable? Why do Christians say some culturally acceptable things are sins? They expect answers, not emotional pleas. And there are answers to all these questions and more. That is not to say the answers are always easy to swallow, but there are answers. Always be ready to give a defense of your faith with gentleness and reverence, with thoughtful and honest answers, even when the question and the answer is difficult.

Paul preached the gospel in Athens against all odds. He made a defense of his faith with gentleness and reverence. He knew the scriptures and theology, he knew what he believed, and so was able to make a reasoned case for Christianity. Because of Paul's work, many were saved and the Gospel was carried to the end of the earth. Peter continues this theme, telling us to always be ready to give an answer for our faith. We are not to check our brains at the door. Yes, we must have faith, but that faith can be well reasoned.

My friends, the lost in our culture are questioning, just as they were in Athens. Learn what you believe, and why, and be prepared to give an answer for your faith, for there are people who desperately need to hear it.

Perhaps you will be the one to shine light in their darkness, to share the gospel with them, or to name the unknown God for them. May we all strive to be prepared to give an answer for our faith with gentleness and reverence, as our God calls us to do.

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