

South Bay Church Plant Sabbath School

10 – Reaching Secular People

Introduction

Paul's strategy has been consistent in Acts. Find Jews and God-fearing Greeks who will listen and persuade them that Jesus is the Messiah. Plant a church and when persecution arises, move on. This week, however, we see Paul in the marketplace and we will look at his attempts to reach those who are not religious and from this draw out principles for how we can reach secular people.

What are some of the challenges that you have faced in speaking to secular friends or coworkers about Jesus?

Acts 17:14-21

Paul goes beyond the synagogue to evangelize the marketplace in Athens. Every day, he's "reasoning" with people to persuade them to accept Jesus. Finally, some philosophers take Paul to the Areopagus, also known as Mars Hill, and ask him to give a speech.

Why was it so difficult for the people of Athens to understand what Paul was trying to tell them? How might it be difficult for non-Adventists to understand the message we are trying to share?

Acts 17:22-23

How does Paul begin his argument and why does he begin this way?

How is this like how Jesus begins his conversation with the Samaritan woman? **John 4:7-9**

What can we learn from this approach to people who are not of our faith?

Acts 17:24-25

During a time when Jews kept themselves apart from Gentiles, why is it important for Paul to begin with creation? How is Paul seeking to bypass their prejudices against the Jewish religion?

How is like the discussion that Jesus has with the woman at the well? **John 4:21-24**

Acts 17:26-28

Paul is leading them from the idea of a generic creator god to the concept of a God who is personally invested in each person's life. Paul is answering the major philosophies of Athens. The Epicureans believed that pleasure was the chief goal of life and that while there were gods, they took no interest in the lives of people. On the other hand, the Stoics emphasized the importance of living in harmony with nature and living a simple, virtuous life. Paul quotes from the Stoic philosophers and seems well-acquainted with their writings.

How important is it to know the philosophy and culture of secular people?

"The wisest of his hearers were astonished as they listened to his reasoning. He showed himself familiar with their works of art, their literature, and their religion.... But with a tact born of divine love, he carefully drew their minds away from heathen deities, by revealing to them the true God, who was to them unknown." *Acts of the Apostles*, 237, 241.

Acts 17:29-31

Paul now moves to an appeal. What false ideas does he confront and what hope does he give?

As you look at Paul's argument, notice how he (a) finds something to affirm, (b) relates to their culture, (c) logically argues from their worldview to a biblical worldview, and (d) makes an appeal. How can we use this approach to appeal to those who are more secular or philosophical?

Paul is engaging in something called apologetics. This is a process of providing logical reasons for our beliefs. To be able to answer skeptics, we must first wrestle with their doubts. "Only if you struggle long and hard with objections to your faith will you be able to provide grounds for your beliefs to skeptics, including yourself, that are plausible rather than ridiculous or offensive." Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*. Keller suggests that an effective way to engage non-believers is to get them to doubt their own doubts. "If you come to recognize the beliefs on which your doubts about Christianity are based, and if you seek as much proof for those beliefs as you seek from Christians for theirs, you will discover that your doubts are not as solid as they first appeared."

Acts 17:32-33

Note the different reactions to Paul. Why do you think the response to Paul's preaching was less positive here than in places he had preached at earlier?

Acts 18:1-3

Paul may have been a little discouraged at this point. He came to Corinth "in weakness and fear, and with much trembling" (1Co 2:3). It was a large and prosperous city of 200,000 people and the center of idolatry and false religion. The first thing he did was to make friends with fellow believers and to work alongside them.

How important is it for a church planting team to meet outside of Sabbath services and to become friends?

Acts 18:4-8

Paul preaches in the synagogue, leading to an appeal to accept Jesus as the promised Messiah. Getting kicked out by the Jews, he moves next door to the house of a Gentile, but the ruler of the synagogue joins the new church plant (Paul even baptizes him – 1 Cor 1:14-16), and many Corinthians are converted.

What made Paul's ministry so effective in this pagan and immoral city? **1 Corinthians 2:2**

How can we make Christ the center of everything that we do?

Acts 18:9-17

In light of the promise that was given to Paul, how do we understand the challenges that he faced? The Jews claimed that Paul was persuading people to break God's law.

What are difficulties that you think you will face as you try to witness to others? How might people misunderstand your religious beliefs?

Conclusion

Reaching people who are not of our faith, and who may have a limited understanding of what we are trying to share, can be difficult. We must begin where they are and build the bridge back to the gospel. By learning to reason with unbelievers using their concepts/worldview, we can direct them to the center of our faith – Jesus. Even with this approach, we may still be misunderstood.