

Reaching the Resistant

Acts 21:37-22:29

Introduction

A college student was in a philosophy class which had a discussion about God's existence. The professor presented the following logic as he asked, "Has anyone in this class ever heard God speak?"

No one answered. "Has anyone in this class ever touched God?"

Again, no one answered. "Has anyone in this class ever seen God?"

When no one spoke up for the third time, he simply stated, "It is clear that God does not exist."

One student however, at that moment, decided to speak on God's behalf. He asked permission to reply and the professor happily granted it. The student asked the class, "Has anyone in here ever touched our professor's brain?"

Silence. "Has anyone in this class ever heard the professor's brain speak?"

Silence. "Has anyone in this class ever seen our professor's brain?"

When no one answered, that brave student said, "It is clear that our professor's brain does not exist."

I am not suggesting this approach, by the way!

Perhaps however, like me, you are on the lookout for better ways to state your case for the glory of God. You want more effective ways and methods to share your faith with unbelievers.

Perhaps those unbelievers are members of your family, and you struggle with how to penetrate their unbelief. Or perhaps it is a co-worker, roommate, or neighbor who is the unbeliever. And you have

discovered that all these people have a little different point of view, and they all have different perspectives and responses.

People you may know – Responses you may have had

Let me suggest a few categories of responses I have had over the years, and perhaps you can add some of these to your list. They represent people you may know; they are some of the responses you may have encountered.

Skeptical and disillusioned

1. First, I have attempted to witness to people who could be caricatured as skeptical and disillusioned.

These are people who have been burned before by some earlier commitment to a church or cult. They may even have some form of a personal testimony. They may have gone forward in some evangelistic rally, but a few days later, they found themselves wondering if they were not just another client in the religious game of numbers. Nothing happened; their lives did not reform overnight; religion simply did not work.

These are people you cannot talk to without them wanting to express how deeply troubled they are by the latest report of debates within an ecclesiastical body – debates like the ones on homosexuality and abortion.

They are disillusioned by the claims of any and every form of religion, and they believe that you represent just one more form.

Angry and turned off

2. Secondly, there are the angry and turned off people.

These people have been offended by the church; they were disappointed by the failure of the church in any number of ways that the church failed them. And the church will fail people, because the church is made up of fallen people.

These are the ones who talk about the hypocrites that infest the church, and that the church only cares about money.

These people view Christians as self-righteous and dogmatic. They simply feel that they are better off without anyone or any church that says that they are sinners and that they need a Savior to rescue them from an eternal hell.

Frankly, they do not want to hear it – unless, of course, you want to hear them talk about how bad it is.

Apathetic and nonchalant

3. A third group of people could be considered apathetic and nonchalant.

Frankly, they are not too sure about this religion thing invading more than an hour or two a year. They have drawn the line at anything more than Christmas and Easter, and beyond that, they simply do not show an interest. They seem a little perplexed that you would ever want to take the Bible seriously, or God seriously for that matter.

They are like Bill Gates who said in an interview that taking one day a week to be involved with worship was not a very efficient use of one's week.

Confused and uncertain

4. Fourthly, there are those who are confused and uncertain.

These are the spiritual wanderers who have dabbled in a good many things already. They say they believe in God and the Bible, but the more you probe, the more you discover their God is a different God and their Bible is "Mankind's Sacred Version".

I pulled an article out of *US Airways* magazine recently. It gave the locations of the most popular

sites for spiritual pilgrims to travel to in order to receive enlightenment or some connection with spirituality. What was tragically shocking to me was to read that millions of people travel to these sites every single year.

One of these locations involves the faithful journey to Sodo. Many take, "the faithful journey from all parts of Haiti to the little town of Bonheur, where they immerse themselves in a waterfall supposedly possessed by water deities."

Guadeloupe is another location where hundreds of thousands of people travel annually to see the image of Mary miraculously burned into the cloak of an Indian peasant after she visited him in 1531.

Benares in India is a location where millions of Hindus follow a sacred trail along the Ganges River and perform ritual bathing at five sacred crossings. These are Hindus who believe that, if their cremated ashes are one day scattered on this sacred river, their souls will be sped along to paradise.

These are confused and uncertain people.

In our country, these people are more confused than ever by the myriad of religious voices calling out for their attention. Your testimony of Christ's love and grace is simply one more confusing voice.

Resistant and unyielding

5. A fifth category of people would be the resistant and unyielding.

Even though your testimony makes some sense to them, they, for whatever reason you cannot seem to put your finger on, just simply do not want to become a Christian.

Intellectual and proud

6. Then, there are the intellectual and proud.

Some of them believe Christianity is all right if you need that crutch. In other words, "If it makes you feel better, then go ahead and do it, but I don't need any props; I can handle life on my own."

These are also individuals who most likely want to argue that any and every religion is right, and if you were only a little more intelligent, you would discover that the Bible itself leaves room for any belief system.

I was on a plane some months ago, on a flight from New Delhi to Hyderabad. David Williams was on the aisle, I was at the window, and a Canadian was stuck between us. David prayed, I talked, and the

Canadian argued. For more than an hour this man who had just taken a trip to the Lotus Temple of the B'Hai religion, reasoned that every verse I quoted about Jesus Christ really did not say that about Jesus Christ.

- He really did not rise from the dead.
- He really did not come as the Messiah.
- He did not really say that no one could come to the Father except through Him.
- The Bible did not really promise judgement to anyone adding or taking away from its revelation.

In fact, what he wanted to convince me of was the fact that Christianity was really more embracing of other beliefs than I was allowing. I should just understand that the Bible really did not mean those things that it said and I should not take at face value the words of scripture.

After about an hour of not being able to even rattle this man, I noticed a newspaper that he had just read sticking out of the flap in front of him. The headlines said, "Woman Killed In Auto Accident." I grabbed the newspaper, put it out to him, and said, "Read this headline."

He read it, "Woman Killed In Auto Accident."

I then said, "Isn't that amazing, this woman broke her leg playing tennis."

His leg started bouncing up and down at this point. He smiled because he knew what I meant. Those words could mean nothing other than that this woman was killed – they could not mean she broke her leg or had an operation or bought a new car.

The discussion ended there. He was not too happy, and I was very frustrated that I had not been able to find the chink in his intellectually proud armor. While I knew God was sovereign in the matter of salvation, I was the messenger and felt ill equipped and unprepared to really make a difference.

Perhaps you have felt that way; perhaps you have felt as if you just needed something clever or illustrative to open their heart. You have tried everything you know how to do, as you deal with that angry and turned off relative; that apathetic spouse; that disillusioned neighbor; that co-worker who experiments with everything but the truth.

Well, if you could wrap all of these people up and put them in one audience, you would have the audience found in Acts, chapter 21. I invite your attention there as Paul presents his argument and defense for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Review

Before we begin our study of Paul's words recorded by Luke, let us refresh our memory with what created a riot in the temple and the beating of Paul by an angry Jewish mob.

In chapter 21, the crowd accused Paul of desecrating the temple by bringing a Gentile into the inner sanctuary. It was not true, but everyone believed it, and it started a riot.

Paul was also accused of leading people to abandon Moses, which was another false accusation.

As the crowd began to beat Paul to death, the Roman soldiers rushed in and rescued him.

You ought to know that Roman soldiers were headquartered in Fort Antonia, which was located on a precipice overlooking the temple grounds. The Roman soldiers were able to see the riot break out – a riot that they were responsible to quell.

So, as you notice in verse 32 of chapter 21, the soldiers rushed into the temple and immediately rescued and handcuffed Paul.

Paul's Three Point Testimony

Now, we really do not know why the Roman soldiers immediately chained Paul until we get to verse 37. Let us pick up our study at verses 37 and 38.

As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the commander, "May I say something to you?" And he [the commander] said, "Do you know Greek? Then you are not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?"

That is why Paul was chained. The Jews thought he was a heretic; the Romans thought he was one of their ten most wanted – an Egyptian terrorist who led a huge gang known as the Assassins.

Josephus, the first century historian, fills in the blanks for us as he makes reference to an Egyptian false prophet who some years earlier, had taken several thousand of his followers to march against Jerusalem. He promised them that, at his command, the walls of Jerusalem would fall down and they would be able to conquer the Roman army. So, he commanded, but the walls stayed put, and Felix sent his Roman army against them – killing several hundred of these Assassins, but failing to capture the Egyptian leader.

The word “assassin” comes from the Latin word “sica,” which means, “dagger”. These men would mingle in the marketplace and in a crowd with a dagger hidden in their cloak. Then, when they had an opportunity, they would stab their victim and slip away. They assassinated Jews who collaborated with Romans, as well as Romans themselves.

This Roman commander thought he had captured the Egyptian, until Paul spoke in fluent Greek and revealed that he was not the Egyptian. Instead, as we read in verses 39 and 40,

But Paul said, “I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city; and I beg you, allow me to speak to the people.” When he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the stairs, motioned to the people with his hand; and when there was a great hush, he spoke to them in the Hebrew dialect . . .

Stop at this point. What is Paul doing? Is he proving that he is no intellectual slouch? Is he proving that he can speak fluently in more than one language?

Oh no. As Paul begins his testimony, he accomplishes several things that provide a good example for us, as we testify before people who are angry, confused, searching, turned off, and all of the categories that we just mentioned. Let me give you three points of Paul’s testimony.

Point #1 – Look at my religious heritage!

1. The first point is, “Look at my religious heritage!”

Paul did several things. Let me point them out.

Paul spoke in a language they understood and respected

- First, Paul spoke in a language they understood and respected.

In other words, Paul spoke to them in their mother tongue, the Hebrew dialect, and more than likely, in the Jewish Aramaic.

Notice the effect it had on this lynching mob. Look at verse 2 of chapter 22.

And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew dialect, they became even more quiet . . .

Paul disarmed their anger by showing respect

- The second thing Paul did was disarm their anger by showing respect.

Go back to verse 1 of chapter 22. The first words that this beaten apostle speaks to this crowd are,

Brethren and fathers . . .

Brethren and fathers?!?! How about, “What do you think you’re doing, you unruly mob? You almost killed me! I’m bleeding and hurt! May my blood be upon your heads and the heads of your equally murderous forefathers!”

We would expect something good like that!

Paul is living out Proverbs, chapter 15, verse 1a.

A gentle answer turns away wrath . . .

For the moment, the crowd comes to a hush and Paul continues. In fact, he gives us principle number 3 in telling others about Christ.

Paul recognized the gospel could only be offered and never forced

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Notice verse 1 of chapter 22 again.

Brethren and fathers, hear my defense which I now offer to you.

The word translated “defense” comes from the Greek word “apologia,” which gives us the word “apology”. It also gives us our formal English word for the theological defense, or apologetic of the gospel.

Paul says, “If you will allow me, I would like you to hear my formal defense of what I believe.”

Paul ignored their accusation and focused on the issue

- Paul ignored their accusation and focused on the issue.

The accusation of the Jews that Paul had brought a Gentile into the temple proper was false. Paul ignored that and focused instead on the critical issues at hand. Let us listen in at verse 3.

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, . . .

(Notice the way he clearly establishes his background in the law of Moses. Then, Paul does something absolutely amazing!),

. . . being zealous for God, just as you all are today.

Paul is attributing to this mob the best possible motive. They have tried to kill him, and he verbalizes that he understands why they felt that way and that he understands they are zealous for God. I do not think I would have said that. I would have said, "You are all crazy!" Paul however, publicly gives them the benefit of the doubt. They did not know what they were fighting against in Paul!

Ladies and gentlemen, Paul did the same thing that Jesus Christ did on the cross, when He said, as recorded in Luke, chapter 23, verse 24a,

Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.

Now Paul continues and, in fact, identifies with the hatred of this mob. Notice verses 4 and 5 of chapter 22.

I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, as also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify. From them I also received letters to the brethren, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished.

This brings us to point number 2. Paul will do nothing more than present the story of his conversion to this One he had so despised.

Point #2 – Listen to my spiritual awakening!

2. Point number two is, "Listen to my spiritual awakening!"

Look at verses 6 through 8 of chapter 22.

But it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And I answered, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said to me, "I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting."

Imagine the shock this was to Paul – and to Paul's audience now. This was the name of the One who had thirty years earlier, created a stir by clearing out this temple with a whip. This was the One who had claimed to be equal with God – the Messiah Himself. Continue to verses 9 through 16.

And those who were with me saw the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me.

And I said, "What shall I do, Lord?" . . .

(Paul now attributes that title "Lord" to Jesus the Nazarene. Paul in effect, states, "Jesus of Nazareth is Lord of Heaven and Earth, and man can do nothing but submit to His sovereignty with the question, 'Lord, what do You want me to do with my life? What shall I do, Lord?'"),

. . . And the Lord said to me, "Get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do."

But since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me and came into Damascus.

A certain Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, . . .

(Notice again, Paul's subtle connection of a Christian with a respect for the Law.),

. . . and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there,

came to me, and standing near said to me, "Brother Saul, receive your sight!" And at that very time I looked up at him.

And he said, "The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from His mouth.

"For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard.

"Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name."

Now verse 16 is a verse that is used as a proof-text by the Church of Christ and other denominations that believe baptism saves or that salvation cannot occur without baptism. Let me touch on this briefly, since I have dealt with it thoroughly in our discussion of Acts, chapter 2.

I will mention that at least in this verse, the confusion is simply created by the English language. The Greek participle in verse 16 is the verb "calling" or "calling on His name." The antecedent to the participle is the phrase "wash away your sins," not "be baptized" – they are two separate verbs.

In other words, it is the calling upon the Lord that effectively washes away the sin. It would literally be

true to the Greek language to translate this verse by reversing the order of the verbs so that it would read, "Having called upon the Lord and your sins having been washed away, arise and be baptized."

Water baptism was simply the outward sign of the inward cleansing that has already taken place.

In the New Testament church, as explained further in the epistles, the ordinances of baptism and communion are not sacramental, but memorial. They do not dispense the grace of God, they display the grace of God in the lives of those who have already called on His name for salvation.

Point #3 – Lean from my special commission!

3. In point number three, Paul says, "I want you to learn from my special commission from God!"

Look at verses 17 through 22.

It happened when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I fell into a trance,

and I saw Him saying to me, "Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me."

And I said, "Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in You."

"And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him."

And He said to me, "Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles."

They listened to him up to this statement, and then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!"

By the way, just because someone reacts angrily to your testimony or rejects your testimony, does not mean you did not do a good job of it. It simply means that you, like Paul, eventually got to the point where it meddled in their lives; it confronted their sin and their prejudice.

Eventually, ladies and gentlemen, sharing the gospel reaches the verdict – you are a sinner, guilty before God, and you must ask Christ for forgiveness and cleansing.

Continue to verses 23 through 28.

And as they were crying out and throwing off their cloaks and tossing dust into the air,

the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, stating that he should be examined by scourging so that he might find out the reason why they were shouting against him that way.

But when they stretched him out with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?"

When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and told him, saying, "What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman."

The commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" And he said, "Yes."

The commander answered, "I acquired this citizenship with a large sum of money." And Paul said, "But I was actually born a citizen."

We know from history that the Roman Emperor Claudius and his wife came up with the idea that a slave or a foreigner could purchase Roman citizenship with a large amount of money. The benefit to the individual was tremendous.

In this passage, we learn that a Roman citizen was guaranteed the right to a trial before being punished. Paul makes it clear that he did not save up money to buy his citizenship, but had been born a citizen of Rome. Paul's father was evidently a Roman citizen himself.

Continue to verse 29.

Therefore those who were about to examine him immediately let go of him; and the commander also was afraid when he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had put him in chains.

Application – Two Reminders

Let us apply this text with two reminders:

1. First, the responsibility to share the gospel is ours!
2. Secondly, the responsibility to save the unbeliever is God's!

Those who emphasize God's sovereignty often forget our responsibility, and those who emphasize

our responsibility often forget that God saves. It is God who opens the heart; the miracle of salvation in the heart of a sinner is the amazing grace work of our God.

Today, we can do nothing less as a family of believers, than to come and worship the God of all grace Who set us free.

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