

Discovery Hour
E100, Week 16
April 25, 2010
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The readings for this week all come from the book of Acts and focus most on Paul's missionary journeys in the last two-thirds of the book. These texts cover his first missionary journey from 46 – 48 A.D. (Acts 13-14), second 49 – 52 A.D. (15-18), and third 53- 58 A.D. (18-21). It begins with Saul/ Paul's conversion. Importantly, in Acts 9: 4 when Jesus appears to Paul on the road to Damascus he says, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" This is interesting and important because Paul was actually persecuting Christians and the Church but in this statement Jesus makes the point that our identification with him is so close, that these are the same thing. There is also a clear pattern in these chapters of the gospel being first offered to the Jews, but then also offered to the Gentiles. By the end of the book, the church has spread well beyond Jerusalem and well beyond the first Christians who were Jewish. In class we will focus on Paul's engagement with those not yet of the faith, in particular in Acts 17:16 – 34, but also, if there is time, Acts 14.

In Athens, we learn that Paul was distressed by the number of idols that were there. Scholars estimate that there were tens of thousands of them in the city, most in marketplace (Agora). The text tells us that he spoke to a group that included both Epicureans and Stoics. Epicureans took pleasure to be the ultimate good in this world and pain the ultimate evil, they also took pleasures of the mind to be more fulfilling and long lasting than pleasures of the body. Stoics, originating with Socrates and Plato, took reason to be the only reliable guide for determining what is best and were suspicious of emotion and sought to control it. The Areopagus, also mentioned in this passage, was originally a group of wise elders and former city rulers that in ancient Athens had decided murder trials but by the first century had evolved to being in charge of religious matters.

Paul does a lot of talking and debating with those outside the faith in the readings this week (withy Grecian Jews in 9:29; 10:34 ff.; 13:16ff; 14:1ff; 17:1 ff; 17:22 ff; In chapter 17:17, the Greek term for "reasoned with" is the same term from which we get dialectic and it connotes a back and forth exchange of ideas. This raises some interesting questions for us both about how we go about ministry as a church and as individual Christians and about how we actually engage with others about our faith. Clearly for Paul, this engagement was what we might call intellectual or at least rational discussion. He clearly made use of the rhetorical training he had received in his Greek influenced education (2 Cor. 5:11). To what extent does the Christian church in the United States today engage in such activity? Can we "reason" someone into the faith or into a commitment to Christ? If not, what role does human reason play? How far should we go in adapting to our audience?

To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some (1 Cor. 9:22)

Discussion Questions

What are the characteristics of our audience today?

What is it that they misunderstand about God the most?

Paul reached his audience by meeting them in public places where speeches and discussions frequently took place, how about us today?

Where and how can we best reason with WL residents?