

16. Healthy Churches Apply Godly Flexibility

In our last three topics, we have talked about developing godly flexibility, understanding godly flexibility, and practicing godly flexibility. Our topic, today, will talk about applying godly flexibility, especially in the area of evangelism. Godly flexibility is critical if we are going to be effective in evangelism today. Paul demonstrated this godly flexibility in every city he visited. We will use his ministry in Athens to illustrate various principles of godly flexibility in evangelism.

First, we see that Paul took time to discern what groups of people were in Athens. Acts 17:16-17 says, “Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. Therefore, he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there.” Paul quickly recognized that this city was given over to idols. There were some people who recognized God, but the vast majority followed various idols and had no concept of a Creator who had a personal interest in the lives of individuals. That describes most of the people in much of the world today, especially in the major cities of the world.

Second, Paul chose to meet people where they lived, worked, and spent their free time. There were some Jews, and some Gentile worshipers, in the city. As a result, Paul met them where they spent their free time. That was in the synagogue. However, since the city was given over to idolatry, most of the people in the city never came near the synagogue. Paul knew that he must meet the rest of the people where they lived, worked, and spent their free time and not expect them to come to the synagogue, because they would never come. This caused him to go daily to the marketplace to meet people. There, Paul spent his time reasoning with them and discussing the death and resurrection of Christ.

Third, Paul took time to understand the various philosophies and cultures of the people. Acts 17:18 says, “Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, ‘What does this babbler want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,’ because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.” The Epicureans had given up the search for truth and chosen to satisfy themselves with pleasure. The search for pleasure is one of the major philosophies that drives many of the people of the world today. In contrast, the Stoics lived a very disciplined life and focused on self-sufficiency. The desire for such self-sufficiency is also a very real philosophy today and drives many people to seek wealth and other things.

Fourth, Paul was willing to explain his beliefs to them in a place where they would feel comfortable. Acts 17:19-21 says, “And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, ‘May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean.’ For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.” Here, we see a common characteristic of people in cities. They are open to listen and discuss any system of beliefs if people will explain those beliefs in a setting where they feel comfortable. The Areopagus was a court on a hill where Paul could explain his teachings.

Fifth, Paul took time to make a distinction between religion (spirituality) and the worship of the Creator, who is the true God. Acts 17:22-23 says, “Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, ‘Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you.’” Paul made it clear that it is possible to be religious, or spiritual, and yet not have a knowledge and understanding of the true God.

Sixth, Paul used one of their objects of worship as a bridge, not a barrier, to explain to them about the true God. Instead of condemning their idols, Paul chose to build a bridge of communication by using the inscription he had read as he had looked at one of their altars. Christ did the same thing when He talked to the Samaritan woman and asked for a drink of water, instead of condemning her lifestyle.

Seventh, Paul began at the point where he needed to begin in that situation. Four common points of contact for sharing the Gospel are found in the New Testament. With Nicodemus, who knew the Old Testament, but was depending on his own religious works, Christ began with confrontation. With the Bereans, who had an Old Testament background and were open to search the Scriptures, Paul began with clarification. With people like the Samaritan woman, and the tax collectors and sinners, who had some knowledge of the Old Testament but felt they were too bad to be forgiven, Christ began with compassion. However, the people in Athens had no Biblical background at all. They were like the young husband in an evangelistic Bible study who I recently asked, “What are we celebrating at Easter?” He thought for a minute, and then said, “I have no idea.” Here, we see that with individuals who had no Biblical background, Paul began with creation. These are four key Cs for evangelism, and each needs a different approach.

Acts 17:24-27 says, “God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.” Here, we see that Paul began with creation, and the Creator, because of the lack of any Biblical background.

Eighth, Paul used illustrations from their culture with which they were familiar. Acts 17:28 says, “For in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'” Here, we see that Paul quoted from one of their own poets, because he knew they would be familiar with the quotation. We see that Paul helped them realize that one of their own poets recognized that there was a Creator who created all things and gave life to all.

Ninth, Paul made a distinction between objects of worship and worship of the Creator. Acts 17:29-30 says, “Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature

is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent.” Here, we see that Paul gave a call to repent, by turning from sin and turning to God, the Creator.

Tenth, Paul worked with the Holy Spirit. John 16:8-11 says that the Holy Spirit convicts of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Acts 17:31 says, “Because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.” The Holy Spirit convinces people of their sin of unbelief and the need to repent. The Holy Spirit convinces people of the fact that Christ is the Righteous One, who paid for our sin by dying on the cross, and the fact that God showed He was satisfied with that payment, by raising Christ from the dead. The Holy Spirit convinces people that Satan has already been judged by Christ’s death and resurrection, and that those who continue to follow him will share in his judgment. Here, we see that Paul worked with the Holy Spirit by sharing all three areas in which the Holy Spirit convicts unbelievers.

Eleventh, Paul recognized three responses by those who heard what He shared. Acts 17:32-34 says, “And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, ‘We will hear you again on this matter.’ So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.” First, there were those who rejected the message. Paul accepted rejection from those who mocked when they heard about the resurrection, because He knew they were really rejecting Christ, not him. Paul saw that there was a second group who wanted to hear more. Today, this is the group of people who are open to having an evangelistic Bible study, so they can learn more about Christianity. Often, these individuals will become Christians in the following weeks, and months, as we have evangelistic Bible studies with them

We also see that the third group believed. Here, we see that they joined Paul. They wanted to spend more time with him, so he could begin helping them grow in their new life in Christ. In our application today, because this group has just put their trust in Christ, they are eager to grow. They will be glad to spend time with us, so they can learn more about Christ and how they can take root in Christ (Colossians 2:6-7) and His love (Ephesians 3:17-19). Since this group of topics has been about developing reproducing churches, it is this third group of people who will form the nucleus for the beginning of a new church in the area where they live. We need to spend a lot of time with this group to help them grow. The second group of people will be the group from which additional people become Christians. We need to continue to work with them in evangelistic Bible studies. May the Lord richly bless you as you develop reproducing Christians who develop reproducing churches.