Video: Love, Not Knowledge

It’s not easy to share the gospel with someone who is really smart, is it? I love how as Caleb watched and listened he noticed that Billy was asking questions. And he took a step toward him. In short, Caleb built some gospel bridges.

Last week we discovered three marks of Missional living from 1 Peter 3:13-16:

- We need to demonstrate our faith by making sure Christ is Lord of our lives
- We must be ready to defend our faith by giving reasons for the hope within us
- And we’ll disarm people when we show them gentleness and respect

Living on mission is really a mindset change. We talked about the importance of seeing ourselves as missionaries, strategically positioned in the QCA, and cleverly disguised as students or engineers or waitresses or EMTs or as neighbors. I heard a real clear example of this on Thursday when Jeremy Tatman spoke at the Day of Prayer Gathering. Jeremy owns the Chick-fil-A franchise in Davenport. He told us that he doesn’t have a restaurant that sells chicken; he has a church that sells chicken! He is definitely living on mission.

As we learn to live with a mission mindset, our focus should be in two directions.

- **Missional.** We are called to be ambassadors of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20) and as such we must approach everything we do as agents of God’s mission in the world. We could call this “go and tell” evangelism.

- **Attractional.** This is where we utilize our weekend services and ministries to attract unbelievers and evangelize the lost. That’s why we’re making invite cards available. There’s also a Mother/Daughter banquet next Saturday that is designed for women to use as an outreach tool. We could call this “come and see” evangelism.

There’s a debate going on among pastors about which one is the best approach but I believe we’re called to practice both. Check out Acts 5:42: “And daily in the
temple [Attractional], and in every house [Missional], they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”

We want to attract families and individuals to our services and we want to unleash you to get involved with people where they live and work and play. Here’s another way to look at what we’re called to do. I’ve shared this with both the staff and deacon teams.

- Gather
- Grow
- Give
- Go

In this series we’re focusing on the “go” element. We gather, grow and we give in order to go. In Acts 17:16-34, we’re given a template so we know how to go. We could say it like this: We must break down barriers and build bridges with those who don’t yet know Christ.

Background

The Apostle Paul had to bounce out of Berea because of persecution and now he’s in Athens to wait for Silas and Timothy. He did what most people do when they go to a beautiful city – he went sightseeing. Instead of being impressed with what he saw, verse 16 says, “his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.” To be “given over” means, that they were “under” idols.

One ancient writer tells us that there were 30,000 gods in Athens! It’s been said that it was easier to bump into an idol than a man when you were walking around. To “be provoked” means to be broken and enraged, to be under sudden attack. We get the word “seizure” from it. Paul was deeply distressed about the depth of their depravity. This reminds me of something Leonard Ravenhill once said: “The world has lost its power to blush over its vice; the church has lost her power to weep over it.”

Instead of leaving the city or complaining to the officials, verse 17 shows us that he went to work. He spent time both in the religious centers – and – in the marketplace, with those who knew about God…and with those who didn’t. We must do the same if we hope to connect the disconnected to Christ. The text says that he did it every day.
Athens was the intellectual center of the world. There were lots of smart people who attended universities, much like the Quad Cities Area where we have a number of universities and colleges, community colleges, tech schools and vocational schools. We see in verse 18 that two groups of philosophers wanted to debate with him.

- The **Epicureans** were atheists; they denied God’s existence and the afterlife. They were content to just live for today – we might call them materialists. The pursuit of pleasure was their chief goal and the avoidance of pain was their deepest desire. Their motto was, “*Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.*” Do you know of any Epicureans in the area? I found it interesting that just this week Rock Island was voted #3 in a list of the 100 most exciting communities in Illinois. The main reason is because of the nightlife in the District.

- The **Stoics** on the other hand, were pantheists – they believed that everything is God, and that He does not exist as a separate entity, but in the rocks and trees and in every material thing. Stoics tried to live in harmony with nature and were self-sufficient. Their attitude toward life was one of ultimate resignation – their motto was, “*Grin and bear it.*” Apathy was regarded as the highest virtue in life. Do you know anyone like that today?

Now, look at the last part of verse 18 through verse 21: “*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. 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.”*”

Some of these smart people treated Paul with utter disdain. The word *babbler* is literally a “*seed-picker.*” They saw Paul as one of the little birds in the marketplace that flitted around pecking at seeds here and there. In their minds, Paul was little more than a collector of fragments of truth – and they dismissed him.
But others were interested. In their theology, they had some room for additional gods. That reminds of a Hindu I talked to recently. He has a ton of gods and to him Jesus is just one more.

Athens was filled with idols and ideas. Things haven’t changed that much have they? They just go by different names. John Calvin nailed it when he said that “the human hear is an idol factory...every one of us from our mother’s womb is an expert in inventing idols.” If we want to make bridges, we must travel to where people are and interact with them.

In particular, the Athenians liked to hear about “new” things. If something was “trending” on Twitter, they were all over it and so they brought Paul before the Supreme Court of Athens to explain what he believed. This is one of the most dramatic scenes in the New Testament – Paul preaching the gospel in the intellectual capital of the world. His words are clear, concise, and very much to the point. Likewise, we must break down barriers and build bridges with those who don’t yet know Christ.

Before we look at how he built bridges to the people of Athens, it’s important for us to know that there’s been a big shift in how non-Christians think today. Our post-modern culture is different than it was a generation ago, or even a decade ago. I read a post recently called "15 Characteristics of Today’s Unchurched Person." Here are a handful that jumped out at me.

1. They don’t all have big problems. Many are quite content with their lives without God.
2. They feel less guilty than we think.
3. Most are spiritual.
4. You can’t call them back to something they never knew. An increasing number of Americans are claiming no religious affiliation when asked to state their religious identity. Researchers now refer to them as the “nones.” A recent Pew Research Study discovered that “nones” have grown from 15% of the population to 20% in the last five years. Thom Ranier also points out that there are more “nominals” and more “nomads” than ever before.
5. They want us to be Christian and they hate our hypocrisy. Enough said.
6. They’re intelligent, so we need to speak to that.

As we walk through our text, I want us to see Paul’s approach as a model for us as we mix it up with the intelligent, atheistic and apathetic people in our own lives. I
see five things that Paul did to make gospel bridges.

1 -- Be Courteous

If we want to follow Paul’s lead, the first thing we need to do is to Be Courteous. Look at verse 22: “Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, ‘Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious.’” Don’t miss this. Paul was repulsed by all their idols and their ideas but he was respectful!

What a great approach. He didn’t denounce them or attack their idolatry. In fact, he paid them a compliment. He basically said, “As I’ve been walking around your city, I’ve noticed one thing about you: You are a very religious people.” He didn’t begin by saying, “I’ve come to expose your sins, you dirty, wretched, hell-bound, idol-worshipping, heathenistic pagans.”

Are you courteous when you spend time with people who are not yet Christians? Or, are you secretly angry with them because of some of the things they do? We should never be surprised when non-Christians act like non-Christians. Are you kind and accepting or are you cold and abrasive? Non-believers will pick up on our attitudes so we need to be careful. Let’s make sure we’re building bridges, not burning them.

How Will You Respond?

Let’s take this to a deeper level. With all the cultural chaos and societal sins swirling around us, it’s not easy to respond redemptively, is it? I wrote down four possible ways we can respond.

1. Isolate. At times in church history, the world was so wicked that some believers retreated to monasteries and others did even more unusual things. Anthony, the founder of Christian monasticism, never changed his vest or washed his feet. He was outdone by Simon Stylites, who spent the last 36 years of his life on top of a fifty-foot pillar. Another guy named Anatole from France thought that was a bit extreme so he put on a simple garment and sat on a chair on top of his kitchen table. Everything went well until his family returned home. They thought he had lost it and told him so. They made life miserable for him so he quit his vigil. Reflecting on his attempt at isolation, he remarked, “I soon perceived that it is a very difficult thing to be a saint while living with your own family!”

2. Insulate. It’s not easy to isolate so some people choose to insulate themselves
from the problems and pain of those who don’t yet know Christ. These people spend almost all their time with other Christians and when they do have conversations about lost people their words are often judgmental. One of my pastor friends put it like this: We have to stop thinking “us vs. them” and move toward “us for them.”

3. **Imitate.** I’m afraid this is where the majority of believers end up. Instead of fighting the world, this person just wants to fit in and ends up caving into the culture.

4. **Infiltrate.** This is the heart of Jesus. *We must break down barriers and build bridges with those who don’t yet know Christ.*

2 – Be Contemporary

Paul was courteous when he dealt with people operating within a different worldview. We see in the first part of verse 23 that secondly, he was also contemporary. He established some common ground with his listeners. Here’s another way to say it: When he was courteous, he broke down barriers; when he was contemporary, he built bridges to the heart of his audience.

Notice verse 23: “*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.*” Paul was out where the people lived and worked. He hung out with the lost. This is important for several reasons. First, it would tell the Athenians that Paul had taken the time to get to know their city. This is a key principle, isn’t it? You’ve got to get to know people if you want to build a gospel bridge to them.

Second, this statement tells us that Paul found a natural point of contact. As he walked around, he looked for connectors, or bridges, from their world to the gospel. In missions, these are called “redemptive analogies,” which are cultural or traditional beliefs that the missionary can use as a springboard to explain the gospel message.

As Paul walked around, he came upon an altar with a strange inscription: “*To an unknown God.*” Let me also point out that Paul quotes two pagan poets during his sermon in verse 28. He does this not to endorse them but to make a point of contact with the culture. It would be like using a line from Les Mis or the Hunger Games or from the Amazing Spider Man as a starting point to dive into the depth
of the gospel.

Brothers and sisters, are you spending enough time with your neighbors? Do you know what their interests are? Do you know what they are concerned about? Do you know those things that make them happy? The things that make them cry? Have you discovered any idols in their hearts? We must break down barriers and build bridges with those who don’t yet know Christ.

3 – Be Courageous

Not only was Paul courteous and contemporary, he was also courageous. I like what Tim Keller said about this passage: “If you’re not filled with indignation you will not have courage to do what Paul did; and if you only have indignation, you won’t have the gentleness that you need.” Notice how bold Paul was in verse 23: “Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you.” This probably made them sit on the edge of their stone seats.

The phrase “worship without knowing” really means “in ignorance” though the hearers wouldn’t have taken it that way. It’s as if he is saying, “You admit there is a God you don’t know. I happen to know that God and I will now proclaim him to you.”

In verses 24-25, Paul gives them a theology lesson, courageously speaking of God as the Creator and the Giver of all things: “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.” God exists. He’s the Creator. He is sovereign. He is involved. He sustains. And He is close. One pastor put it like this:

• You didn’t make God; He made you.
• He doesn’t need you; you need Him.
• He’s looking for you even when you’re not looking for Him.

One of our neighbors passed away this week. I had the opportunity to visit with her several times before she died and was able to read Scripture and pray for her. A couple days ago, a couple of our neighbors stopped by to chat when I was outside and thanked me for spending time with her. I told them that Miss Eva was ready to die. I then garnered the courage to say, “None of us know when our time’s up so we all need to be ready to die.” The conversation quickly changed direction
but I was thankful that I was able to say what I said.

When I think about the need to be courageous, I’m helped greatly by something Bill Bright, the founder of Cru, once said: “Instead of assuming that people don’t want to hear the gospel, try instead to assume that they will be interested in the good news. Your friend may have just gone through circumstances that have prepared his heart to receive Jesus Christ. God may have been leading him into an awareness of his need for truth. Perhaps he has felt especially alone -- or in need of love.”

➔ Katie Lundell Interview. What kind of ministry is God calling you to?

4 -- Be Christ-Centered

As Paul moves from being courteous to being contemporary, to being courageous, he comes to the meat of his message: he was Christ-centered. It’s not enough to just be nice and spend time with people. Nor is it enough to just be bold. We must look for ways to talk about Jesus. Look at verse 31: “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.”

Paul hit on sin, righteousness and judgment because according to John 16:8 that’s how the Holy Spirit convicts people.

Paul was not afraid to speak of an inescapable day of judgment. He did not shrink from speaking the truth about the resurrection of Jesus, even though he knew that many of his listeners would not want to hear it. He lifted up the supremacy of Christ and didn’t shy away from speaking about sin.

In a recent interview, Michael Bloomberg, former mayor of New York City and the 16th richest person in the world, made a stunning statement last week: “I’m telling you if there’s a God, when I get to heaven I’m not stopping to be interviewed. I am heading straight in. I have earned my place in heaven. It’s not even close.” If the Apostle Paul hung out with the former mayor how do you think he would build a gospel bridge to Him? Turn to the person next to you and discuss this.

As God gives you opportunity, speak boldly for Christ. Be unashamed. Tell people that Jesus died in their place and that they can be forgiven for all the sins they have committed. Tell them about His resurrection so that that they can have hope for eternity. Tell them about the love and peace and joy that will be theirs
once they surrender to Christ.

I mentioned last week that a Muslim woman came to one of our Epic Easter services. Cindy Wieckhorst built some bridges with her during the children’s program, which led her to have a courageous and Christ-centered conversation. I asked Cindy to put in her own words what happened: “She seemed excited to hear that the Jesus we talked about was just the same as the Jesus talked about in the Koran and that He seemed to be just like Mohammed in her religion...Then I felt led to share the biggest difference between Jesus and Mohammed was that Jesus rose again on the third day and Mohammed was still in the grave. It was something for her to think about. I pray that she will come back looking for more differences and that her eyes will be opened.”

Let’s break down barriers and build bridges with those who don’t yet know Christ. There’s one final element in Paul’s connecting strategy…

5 -- A Call to Commitment

Verse 30 shows us that Paul called for commitment: “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent.” I see at least 3 responses in the text that are still very common today. Let me remind you that we’re not responsible for how people respond.

- **Some rejected.** Response #1 is found in verse 32: “And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked…” When they heard about the resurrection, they rejected it.

- **Others were reluctant.** A second response is found in the last part of verse 32: “…others said, ‘We will hear you again on this matter.’” Their appetites were whetted and they told Paul that they wanted to talk some more.

- **A few received.** Verse 34 gives us the encouraging news that: “some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.” It’s normally just a few who will be convinced. Many reject. Some are reluctant. A handful receive.

Whatever their response, it’s our responsibility to do what we can to connect them to Christ.
I like what Ray Pritchard says:

- Don’t be ashamed
- Expect opposition
- Keep the focus on Jesus
- Take every opportunity

During this series I want to give some practical ways to begin spiritual conversations with people. Last week we focused on living the Christ-life so that people will ask us some questions. Here are some questions to help introduce Christ into our conversations. I encourage you to write them down and try them out.

1. **How can I pray for you?** Can I pray right now?
2. **What are you giving your life to?** How’s that working for you?
3. **What church do you go to?** I used this with a man I met at a gas station because I only had a few minutes with him. I could tell he was from Africa and was trying to find common ground by asking if he knew Pastor Vitalis. Turns out he didn’t, but I tried. I also used this on Friday in Panera and it led to a great conversation about Christ that allowed me to give a woman a Soul Satisfaction booklet.
4. **Where are you at on your spiritual journey?** This is my go-to approach. I’ve found that this is better than asking someone if they’re a Christian because almost everybody says they are.
5. **Have you come to the place in your spiritual life where you can say you know for certain that if you were to die today you would go to heaven?**
6. **Suppose that you were to die today and stand before God and He were to say to you, “Why should I let you into my heaven?” what would you say?** You may find there are more people with beliefs like Michael Bloomberg.

**Building Bridges**

We understand the importance of bridges in the Quad Cities, don’t we? I understand that a new I-74 bridge is finally going to be built. A lot of preparation has been going on. Some buildings are being knocked down to make room for this bridge.

Friends, we may need to knock some things down in our own lives. We’re going to need to build some new bridges if we hope to connect with people who don’t yet
know Christ. Edgewood has always been about outreach. In fact, the next time you see our logo, think of how God may want to use you to build a bridge to someone who does not yet know Christ. Start by getting to know the names of all your neighbors. Then find out more about each one. Look for a way to serve one of them. And then use your Sunday nights this summer to invite people over.

Maybe you have not yet crossed over to eternal life yourself. In John 5:24 Jesus says, “He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.”

Are you ready to do so right now?

Invitation – “Give Me Jesus”