

How to be an **aPAUL**ologist: Lessons from Acts 17

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Some days I wish I had a *normal* job.

It's usually when I'm sitting in an airplane, and it's early in the morning, and the person next to me asks the question . . . *what do you do for a living?*

For me, there is no *short answer* to that question.

Some jobs are *self-explanatory*. Everyone knows—broadly speaking—what a police officer is, or what a plumber is, or even what a pastor is. But most people don't know what an apologist is. That includes people in the church.

Just so we're clear, an apologist is *not* someone who goes around saying, "I'm so sorry I'm a Christian." No, we make other people sorry that we're Christians. Just joking. It's not that either!

Simply put, an apologist is someone who gives a reason or defense for they *what they believe* and *why they believe it*. **Imagine** a lawyer standing in front of a jury giving a defense for his position. He gives **arguments** and **counter-arguments**. He's trying to be persuasive. That's what apologists do. They are making a case for their position.

The Bible commands us *all* to be an apologist. Probably the most often cited passage comes from the apostle Peter. Peter writes to Christians in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) who are facing intense persecution. And in this letter, he encourages these Christians *to be ready to engage those who oppose the gospel*. He writes,

1 Peter 3:15 – [I]n your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.

The Greek word translated 'defense' is *apologia*. It's used **8 times** in the New Testament and literally means to give a formal defense (or reasoned argument) for one's position.

Paul also tells the church in Philippi that they are all partakers with him of grace, both in his imprisonment "and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel" (Philippians 1:7). It's the **same word**.

So, the Bible *tells* us to be apologists. **But does the Bible show us how to be apologists?** I think the answer is, Yes!

And we don't have to look any further than the apostle Paul. In fact, if we want to be effective apologists, we should *imitate* Paul—we should be apologists *like Paul*—or we should be **aPAUL**ologists.

See, what I did there?

Let's study Acts 17 together, and see if we can pick out **key attributes** of a good apologist. We are going to pick up the story in Acts 17 verse 16.

Lesson #1: If you want to be an aPAULologist, listen apologetically.

Acts 17:16 – "Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols."

Paul is on his *second* missionary journey. Acts 17 *begins* with Paul and Silas arriving in Thessalonica. We read that they start preaching the gospel in the synagogue and (wouldn't you know it?) people are getting saved. The Jewish leaders were not happy about this so they cause an uproar against them. Realizing it's unsafe to stay in Thessalonica, the believers send Paul and Silas to Berea.

When they arrive in Berea, they go straight into the synagogue to preach the gospel. Again, people believe. Unfortunately, the Jews from Thessalonica find out what's going on in Berea and start causing *another* uproar. Here's what the text says:

Acts 17:13-15 – But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. ¹⁴ Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way

to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. ¹⁵ Those who conducted [“escorting” (NIV)] Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.

So Paul was in Thessalonica, but they chased him out of there. Then Paul is in Berea, but they chase him out of there too. Now he’s on his way to Corinth (Acts 18), and finds himself in Athens. **What’s he doing in Athens? He’s waiting. What’s he waiting for?** He’s waiting for his friends—Silas and Timothy—to join him.

Don’t miss how big this is! Everything that follows next is because Paul was waiting.

Where do you wait? Do you wait at the doctor’s office? Do you wait at the grocery store? Do you wait to pick up your kids from school? Do you wait on your lunch break at work? Do you wait between classes?

But Paul isn’t merely waiting—at least not like we typically wait. You know how we wait, right? (Pull out phone and sit on step).

No, Paul doesn’t wait like that. While Paul is waiting, he’s on the look out—he’s *listening*, he’s *watching*, he’s *observing*—for opportunities.

I was teaching a King City Secondary School a few years ago and I was covering an on-call period. That means I was looking after another teachers class for that period. I got to the classroom early to see what was on the agenda for the students. The teacher had already written the instruction on the board. So I found myself sitting at the teacher’s desk *waiting* for class to start. As I’m waiting, I’m listening to the students as they are funnelling through the door. And I couldn’t believe my ears. I overhear one student say to his group of friends, “There’s no good arguments for God’s existence.”

You better believe my spirit was provoked within me. In fact, that resulted was a period-long, fruitful discussion on the evidence of God *in a public school classroom*. **And it all started because I was listening.**

Sometimes I wonder how many opportunities we miss because we’re too busy, too self-involved, too distracted. We’re **not** listening.

Let’s be clear, I’m not talking about *merely* hearing. I’m talking about listening **with an apologetic purpose**. Listening for opportunities that might lead to a fruitful, spiritual conversation.

Sometimes my kids will come into my office while I’m working to ask for something. Without turning my head away from the screen, I might say, “Yes, I’m listening.”

Do you know what my kids will do? They grab my face with two hands; pull face towards theirs, and say, “Look in my eyes.” That’s the kind of listening I’m talking about.

We’re only one verse into our text, and we already learned a valuable lesson. If you want to be aPAULogist, *listen apologetically*.

Lesson #2: If you want to be an aPAULogist, think contextually.

Acts 17:17-21 – So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babblers wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?” ²⁰ For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

In our text, we see Paul engaging two different groups of people. More precisely, we see him engaging two different *religious contexts*. We read that he reasoned “**in the synagogue**” and he reasoned “**in the marketplace**.”

Furthermore, Paul tailored his approach to his context. That is, he approaches those in the *synagogue differently than* he approaches those in the *marketplace*. In other words, Paul *thinks contextually*.

Let’s take a closer look at how Paul reasoned **in the synagogue**.

When Paul reasons *with the Jews in the synagogue*, he goes straight to their Scriptures to connect the dots between the prophesied Messiah in the Old Testament and Jesus.

Look with me at Acts 17:1-4:

Acts 17:1-4 – Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and proving **[notice the verbs]** that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” ⁴ And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.

The synagogue was where Jews (and Gentile converts) would go to worship. In *this* context, Paul has a lot of **common ground**. Both believe in a personal God who created the world and interacts in the world. Both believe in the authority of the Scriptures—what we call the Old Testament. Both believe in the prophesied Messiah—God’s Anointed One.

As a result, Paul uses this context as a *starting point*. The text says he reasoned with these people “from the Scriptures.”

A hundred years ago, we could have taken a similar approach with a North American culture. Many people, at that time, would have shared biblical beliefs about God, the Bible, and morality. But today we have a much different *cultural context*. In fact, I think our *current context* looks much more like the **marketplace** than the **synagogue**. It looks more like **Athens** than **Jerusalem**.

When Paul reasons *in the marketplace (as we will see)*, he takes a different approach. For some of these Athenians, the Christian God is a completely *foreign* concept. It’s a “new teaching” or a “strange thing.”

Athens was a very religiously diverse place. There are Jews, who worshiped a single God—also called *monotheists*. But there were also those who worshipped many gods—called *polytheists*. And people who worshipped no gods.

From verse 16, we already know Athens is a city “full of idols.” *How many idols?* Some think there were as many as 30,000 idols. The streets and buildings were filled with statues to Neptune, Jupiter, Apollo, Athena, etc.

Athens was *also* a hotspot for diverse philosophical views. Paul specifically mentions two kinds of philosophers: **Epicureans** and **Stoics**.

Epicureans taught that all of reality is only material. This is referred as *materialism*. On this view, there are no gods and no life after death. Epicurus—it’s founder—believed in a form of hedonism, where pleasure is the greatest good. Does that sound familiar?

The Stoics taught that all of reality is part of God. God is **not** personal. Rather, God is more like a rational principle that suffuses the universe. While Epicureanism is *atheistic*, Stoicism is *pantheistic*.

Needless to say, these people don’t have the same starting point as the Jews. Paul can’t start with “Thus says the Lord…” The Scriptures aren’t authoritative to them. Instead, he finds a *different* starting point. This is a *different* context.

Some people today are trying to talk to marketplace-Athenians as if they are synagogue-Jews. And we wonder why it feels like we’re talking passed each other. When engaging people in conversations, we need to find out where they are at. Ask questions like, *Who am I talking to? Where are they coming from? What is their worldview? What do they believe and why? And Where might we find some common ground to start from?*

So, not only do we *listen apologetically*, but we also need to *think contextually!*

Lesson #3: If you want to be an aPAULogist, respond graciously.

So, Paul gets dragged to the Areopagus—or “Mars Hill”—to address these philosophers and thinkers.

Acts 17:22-23 – So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.” ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

Notice how Paul *doesn't* begin. He *doesn't* start by saying, "I perceive that you are a bunch of polytheistic pagans or atheistic sinners. What is your problem? Stop worshiping all these idols. Repent or burn in Hell." He doesn't start with **condemnation**; he starts with **admiration**.

Paul graciously begins with **common ground**. It's as if he's says, "You know what I like about you guys? You are very religious. Me too!"

Paul doesn't merely talk-the-talk. He walks-the-walk. He practices what he preaches. To the church in Colossae, he says:

Colossians 4:5-6 – Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. ⁶ Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

This gracious attitude is echoed in Peter's teaching as well.

1 Peter 3:15 – [B]ut in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect . . .

Often times, when you are in discussion with people who don't share our beliefs, **our character is the first thing to go**. But you need to know that our *manner* is as important as our *message*.

I like how pastor Joe Thorn puts it. He says, "**The fools says in his heart, 'The rightness of my theology makes up for the wrongness of my attitude.'**"

If people reject what we say *because of the offensiveness of the message*, that's on them. But if people reject what we say *because of the offensiveness of the messenger*, that's on us.

Paul begins with a *compliment*, but he's about to offer a *correction*. The Athenians have objects of worship to every god under the Sun—and including the Sun. And, just in case they missed a god, they have an altar set up to the 'unknown god.' Paul is going to tell them who this God is.

First, we *listen apologetically*.
Second, we *think contextually*.
Third, we *respond graciously*.

Lesson #4: If you want to be an aPAULogist, know deeply.

Paul continues:

Acts 17:24-27 – ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us . . .

Notice their religiosity—their sincerity—was *not* enough. In other word, they are sincere, but they are sincerely wrong.

Speaking to the church in Rome, Paul says something similar.

Romans 10:1-2 – Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them [Jews who don't know Christ] is that they may be saved. ² For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.

Does that sound familiar? These Athenians *also* have a zeal for their gods, but it's not according to knowledge. They are missing something. They need to know about the one true God.

As in Paul's day, there are many today who are confused about who the true God really is. He's a **foreign god**. They need someone to tell them about God. But if we're going to talk about the true God, then we need to **know** about the true God.

Paul's engagement with these Athenians doesn't even get off the ground without a *deep understanding* of what God is really like. And that knowledge doesn't just come through osmosis. It doesn't just come to us in our sleep. That's not how this works.

It takes work—hard work. It involves hours studying and mediating on God’s Word. It requires time thinking deeply about the nature of God. It takes time reflecting on the Christian worldview. By the way, these are all ways to love God **with all your mind**.

Bottom-line: You will never be able to boldly *speak truth* if you don’t deeply *know truth*.

First, we *listen apologetically*.

Second, we *think contextually*.

Third, we *respond graciously*.

Fourth, we *know deeply*.

Lesson #5: If you want to be an aPAULogist, read widely.

Acts 17:27b-28 –Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for

“In him we live and move and have our being’
as even some of your own poets have said,
“For we are indeed his offspring.’”

Paul does something really remarkable here that I don’t want you to miss. He *doesn’t* quote Scripture. Remember that his audience doesn’t think Scripture is authoritative (Remember Paul is thinking contextually). Instead, Paul quotes *their* authority—their poets and philosophers—to make his point.

“In him we live and move and have our being” is a quote from the poet Epimenides.

“For we are indeed his offspring” is a quote from the Stoic philosopher Aratus.

Don’t miss the significance of this! Paul didn’t just understand *his own worldview*. He understood the worldview of the people he’s talking to. In fact, Paul was able to leverage their own teachers to make his point.

Here’s my question: How well do you know what the culture believes? Can you quote *their* authorities? Paul could.

We need to challenge ourselves to read, watch, and listen to things that we don’t agree with **so that we understand and respond to the culture (like Paul did)**.

If we want to be an aPAULogist, we *listen apologetically*, we *think contextually*, we *respond graciously*, we *know deeply*, we *read widely*.

Lesson #6: If you want to be an aPAULogist, reason wisely.

Acts 17:29 – Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

At this point we’ve been learning a lot from *Paul’s approach*. But let’s not lose sight of his argument. Paul is showing his audience that idolatry is wrong, not by preaching against idolatry *directly*, but by reasoning about the nature of God and examining the implications.

Here’s Paul’s argument in a nutshell:

If there is a Creator God, who made everything, including human beings. And if we are God’s offspring, then God cannot be made of gold or stone. Why not? It makes no sense for the God who created living human beings to be like a carved image made by human beings.

Put another way, **an idol—made by man—can never be the God who made man**.

Paul uses the power of reason to show that they aren’t *really* worshipping the true God.

Lesson #7: If you want to be an aPAULogist, speak boldly.

Acts 17:30-31 – The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Everything Paul said so far is leading up to this point. After showing that *idol worship* is not *God worship* since the true God could never be an idol, Paul talks about God's judgment and their need to repent.

One of the things I love about Paul is that he never backed down from telling the truth, even when it's hard truth. He speaks truth with conviction and confidence. We need more of that kind of courage today.

But where does this confidence come from? It comes from strength of the evidence—it comes from knowing what your saying is true.

How does Paul know it's true? Because the same Jesus who said he would rise from the dead (and did rise from the dead) also said he would judge the world. And if he did the former, you better believe he will do the latter.

So, *speak boldly* knowing truth is on your side.

Lesson #8: If you want to be an aPAULogist, trust faithfully.

Acts 17:32-34 – Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked (1). But others said, "We will hear you again about this (2)." ³³ So Paul went out from their midst. ³⁴ But some men joined him and believed (3), among whom also were Dionysius [Die-on-ee-see-us] the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris [Da-mar-is] and others with them.

Let's be honest: evangelism can be *discouraging*. We usually don't get the results that we want. That's why I'm so glad that Luke records the *results* of Paul's engagement at Mars Hill.

Luke could have simply wrote, "And some believed." Period. After all, that's what he did in Acts 17:4.

Acts 17:4 – And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.

But Luke goes into greater detail in our text. He doesn't just give the *positive* reaction. He also gives the *negative* reaction. And I—for one—am grateful for that.

Some mocked.

There are going to be times when you're in spiritual conversations and people will mock you for what you believe. **Reality check:** Don't be surprised if you don't get better results than the apostle Paul. When he engaged the culture, some ridiculed him and his message. And if it happened to him, it will happen to you. But don't be discouraged! It's your job to be *persuasive*, but it's not your job to *persuade*.

Some wanted to hear more.

There are going to be times when you engage the culture and people will want to hear more. In these interactions, be patient. Give people time and space to process your message. For many people, coming to Christ is a long journey. So, be prepared to walk it with them.

Some believed.

There are going to be times when you will engage the culture and people are going to believe. It happened in Paul's day and it still happens today.

Whatever the response, please don't measure the success of your apologetic in terms of the results. Rather, do your best and then trust God to use your efforts for His glory. We're responsible for our end of the evangelism.

But it's *not* our job to save people. Our job is to introduce them to the One who does.

If you want to be an effective apologist, learn from Paul. Imitate Paul. How? Well, ***listen apologetically***. Listen for opportunities to engage the people around you.

Think contextually. Know your audience. We can't use the *same* approach in every circumstance—or, context. Paul became all things to all men in order to win some.

Respond graciously. Your *attitude* is just as important as your *argument*. Don't forget that!

Know deeply. We need to *know* the truth before we can *speak* the truth.

Read widely. We also need to know what the culture believes.

Reason wisely. We are to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Speak boldly. God has given us a message. Don't be afraid to proclaim it.

Trust faithfully. Trust God to use and multiply your efforts.

And everyone who wants to be an aPAULogist says, Amen! Let's pray!