

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #138: “SO PAUL DEPARTED FROM AMONG THEM”

By John Temples

One thing I've learned in over fifty-plus years of studying God's word is that no part of it is trivial or insignificant--there's a reason for every sentence, every phrase, and every word. So I try to be on the lookout for new insights into seemingly obscure parts of Scripture.

I'm grateful to an Internet writer (sorry, I don't know his name) who alerted me to a seemingly insignificant detail in the record of Paul's sermon to the people of Athens in Acts 17:33: "So Paul departed from among them."

First, the setting for the sermon: you'll remember that Paul had recently left Berea and had come to Athens. However, his usual helpers were delayed, so Paul was alone in the city for a while. Most of us would relish a few days to tour the marvels of Athens, but Paul was not there to sightsee. Verse 16 tells us that "his spirit was stirred" when he saw the city given over to idols, and he could not keep silent. After reasoning with the Jewish people of the city, he ventured into the marketplace, and there encountered the Greek philosophers for which Athens was famous. He was given an opportunity to speak at the Areopagus, a popular gathering place for public discussion of the issues of the day. Paul proceeded to preach God as Creator and Jesus as Savior and Judge. Since the Athenians were Gentiles, not Jews, he based his speech not on Old Testament prophecies and principles, but on the futility of idols and the evidence for God in the natural creation. A few Athenians expressed interest, but most mocked and rejected the message.

That's the setting for the statement of verse 33—"So Paul departed from among them." Now, what can we learn from that statement about our walk with the Lord and our interaction with people of the world?

The first thing that strikes me about this statement is that Paul was "among them" in the first place. Paul went to the Athenians—

- In spite of the prospect of converting any of them being very low.
- In spite of the fact that even before Paul began his message, he was ridiculed and called a babbler (literally, a seed-picker).
- In spite of the fact that he was alone; he had no one to help him or encourage him.
- In spite of the fact that he was disgusted by their paganistic and immoral practices.

Any one of these reasons might be enough to keep a Christian from speaking to a neighbor, a co-worker, or a loved one about Jesus. But the Lord made it clear that He wants us to go out and be “among them”--to practice our Christianity not just in the church building but in the marketplace. Listen to these statements from Jesus and Paul:

- “You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:13, 14).
- “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).
- “Do all things without murmuring and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Philippians 2:14-15).

Are we stirred up and angry when we see the idolatry and immorality all around us? Are we stirred up enough to speak up about it? Paul was. He was “among them”--up close and personal with lost souls.

But the second thing that strikes me is that Paul “departed” from among them. He did not remain among them, consort or compromise with them, or adopt their ways. He delivered the message and left. We are not obligated to remain in the presence of people who are obstinate and determined to mock the word of God. And we are certainly not obligated to place our lives or our loved ones’ lives in danger by continuing to beg and plead with them for a change of heart.

- Jesus told His disciples, “If they persecute you in one city, flee to another” (Matthew 10:23).
- We are told not to “cast our pearls before swine.”
- We are under no compulsion to keep going back to people who mock us and God, in effect saying to them “Please hit me and insult me again.”

God’s intent is to give every person the opportunity to hear the word of salvation, but those opportunities are not limitless. At some point, even God will give up on people (see Romans 1:24, 26, and 28).

One of God’s purposes for godly people is that they act as leaven in their societies and be influences for good. But God’s patience is not limitless. Note what the Hebrew writer said about some of the godly heroes of faith: “They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented; *of whom the world was not worthy*” (Hebrews 11:37-38). 2 Thessalonians 2:12 says that not only will God withdraw His overtures toward people who hate His truth, He will actually send them a delusion so that they may be condemned. The Athenians were of this class (at least most of them). Light can have no fellowship with darkness that is determined to remain darkness. “So Paul departed from among them.”

A third thing that strikes me is that Paul departed from them *without altering or taking back anything he said*. He did not apologize or “go along to get along.” Some preachers are men-pleasers. If they sense that their message has offended some, even though it has been true to the Bible, they will say, “Well, maybe I was a bit hasty or hard on you.” They will imitate Balaam of old and compromise the truth for gain or popularity. We’ve seen or heard of modern megachurch preachers softening their stance on homosexuality or other immoral issues “to stay in step with the times.”

On one occasion Jesus delivered a withering blast against the Pharisees. He called them hypocrites. He accused them of transgressing the commandments of God by their traditions. He said they worshiped God in vain because they taught the doctrines of men. Even the Lord’s own disciples thought He had gone too far.

“Then His disciples came and said to Him, ‘Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?’” (Matthew 15:12).

What was His reply? In verses 13 and 14, He told them that Phariseeism was a plant (a religion) that God had not planted, and that it would be “rooted up.” He then told them, “*Let them alone*--they are blind leaders of the blind.”

So, in departing from the Athenians, Paul was just following his master.

I understand that you and I are not inspired like Jesus or Paul. We have to choose our words carefully. And of course we want to win our loved ones for the Lord. But if we do speak the truth to the lost, and some are offended--and if we satisfy ourselves that we have delivered the message in love--then we are to “let them alone.” We are to resist the temptation to compromise the truth to soothe ruffled feathers. Paul did not stay to argue or to try to convince the unconvinced. You will not be able to “dot every i and cross every t” with some people. At some point, the responsibility becomes theirs to resolve their doubts by studying the word of God for themselves. If their heart is right, they will do that.

TWO CONTRASTING CULTURES

Just before Paul came to Athens, where was he? In Berea. He had just preached to the Bereans. Yes, those Bereans--the ones who were “more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

These two cities--Athens and Berea--put the whole case in perspective. Paul preached the same message in both places. One place “received the word with all readiness”; in the other place “some mocked” and others said “maybe some other time.” These are going to be the reactions we get today, so we might as well prepare for them! It’s all a matter of the seed the soil is planted in.

One final point: Paul departed from among them, but he went somewhere else and delivered the message again. The next chapter says he went to Corinth (Acts 18:1). He did not give up and say, “That’s it--if people don’t appreciate me, I’ll just

quit speaking.” Paul was channeling the spirit of Jeremiah, who said, “I will not make mention of Him, nor speak anymore in His name. But His word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, and I could not” (Jeremiah 20:9-10).

Here is the crux of the matter of Paul’s departing from the Athenians: From the Athenians’ standpoint (at least most of them)--it was an opportunity lost. From Paul’s standpoint--it was an obligation faithfully discharged, and a realization that further attempts to persuade them would be pointless. Things to ponder. --John Temples