

A storyteller who respects his audience (Acts 17:22-31)

Paul's approach in Athens is refreshing.

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I've always found it strangely refreshing that Paul chooses not to ram the gospel down the Athenians' throats. He speaks about essential aspects of belief in Christ without naming names, without embellishing life through rose-tinted glasses, and without using scare tactics. Yet the message is still crystal clear: God created humanity to serve and worship him alone, the one true God, through Christ the resurrected savior.

I am an avid reader of fiction because of the power of narrative to convey truth. But I have never enjoyed fiction marketed as Christian--it always comes off as too preachy, too contrived, too judgmental. It rarely makes me imagine that the author respects readers' intelligence or experience. I prefer mainstream fiction, I think because it reminds me that life, even as a Christian, is lived out here on earth, with real people--Christians and non-Christians who disappoint and hurt us and whom we also disappoint and hurt. And these stories remind me that Christians do not live in a bubble, that part of being a Christian is continuing to find ways to witness to the truth of life in Christ in a language people outside of church will understand.

Paul may not be telling any fictions, but he is using some of the skills of a good storyteller who knows how to capture his audience's attention. And he respects his audience enough to avoid talking down to them.

When Paul comes before the Athenians, he does not openly denounce their false gods by name or point fingers and accuse them of being lost and without guidance.

Rather he acknowledges their journey and their findings, and then shares his own. I like to imagine that Paul's approach to the unbelievers of Athens allows them to see him as a fellow seeker of knowledge and truth, which makes them more receptive to his message. By meeting them where they are, and acknowledging that he has paid attention to their objects of worship, Paul suggests that he takes their journey seriously. He acknowledges what their spiritual and intellectual journey has found. Then he acknowledges his own journey to them and shares what his own search has found.

He believes that what he has found is worth sharing, in fact that it's essential. Part of what Paul shares is his understanding of the human condition. Whatever name you give it, we all spend our lives searching and groping for life and love, and to be claimed. We all hope for the redemption of things we have done and said, and we all spend seasons of our lives erecting a variety of false gods in hopes that they will meet our needs.

This story reminds me of the experience of a good piece of fiction. When we read or hear powerful stories that ring true to the collective human experience, we respond like the Athenians. We may scoff, mostly because we are not ready for the challenge and responsibility that comes with bearing witness to some truth. Or perhaps something in us resonates so powerfully that we can't ignore it, and we are intrigued enough to want to hear more. Or we are just overcome and know that our experience of life will never be the same, and we become believers of the truth we have just experienced.

Whatever our response, the fact is that it requires a good storyteller to keep us invested long enough to hear the message. And a good storyteller respects his audience's intelligence, convinces them that they themselves could be within the story, and trusts that his job is simply to tell the truth as honestly and earnestly as he can, knowing that those who have ears to hear will hear.