

# "Provoked"

Text: Acts 17:16-23, 31

Putting aside all pretense and hypocrisy, may you come face to face with your God here this morning and, confessing your sins, stand before him confident in the righteousness of his Son, Jesus Christ, and in the full and complete forgiveness of sins that he has won for you. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

"Possession," as you may have heard, "is nine points of the law." In more readily understandable terms, that means, more or less, that if I've got my mitts on something, I usually get to keep it. The saying (or a variant thereof) reportedly goes back to early English law, and refers to the fact that if I am in possession of something, the other guy has to produce rock-solid evidence to prove it is his. There is, in fact, something powerfully persuasive in the human existence when it comes to the concept of ownership. The 17<sup>th</sup> Century English philosopher/historian William Godwin once wrote: "What magic is there in the pronoun "my", to overturn the decisions of everlasting truth?"

Do you follow the sense of what he was saying? That little word "my" tends to alter our perceptions and loyalties dramatically – often much more than is fair or reasonable. If it is "mine," it is instantly better. Once we adopt a position on a question, once it become our own, truth tends to take a back seat. My "truth" trumps all other truth. Who hasn't, for example, defended a certain position or opinion in a debate or argument that you knew to be flawed, or just plain wrong, for no other reason than that it was *your* argument? It all goes back, again, to ownership – to "my." In general, if it is mine, it must be right.

This is just raw human pride, and it shows up in rather silly debates about things like football teams (my team is of a more noble character than your team), schools, cars, even children. If it is mine, it is automatically better, by default.

While such things are irritating and often divisive, the real problems show up when we apply such nonsense to our spiritual beliefs. In the end it really doesn't matter if team or school is better than that. What does matter is when you and I allow "my" to cloud our understanding of the truth of God's Word. In other words, one of our most fervent prayers to our Creator God ought to be to strip each of us of the pride of "my" when we approach God's Word. Sentiments like "I just think..." and "It just seems to me..." have no place in faith, religion, or the study of God's Word. The only thing that we ought to be concerned with when we read our Bibles is "What does

God say?" Like the young prophet-in-training Samuel, we are to approach our God with a simple, "**Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.**"

Human opinion is, in fact, most often a great obstacle to Christianity. Understanding this simple fact prepares us to approach and hear God's Word, including our text for this morning – the Word of God recorded in the Book of Acts, the Seventeenth Chapter. Here we will witness, among other things, the natural reaction of opinionated men when confronted with the true message of Jesus Christ. We will see human beings *provoked*.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Acts 17:16-23, 31** *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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbler wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"--because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. <sup>19</sup> And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup> For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." <sup>21</sup> Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. <sup>22</sup> ¶ So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> 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... <sup>31</sup> because (God) 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."*

So far the verbally inspired words from God himself. What a joy and privilege for silly human beings to be able to read and study the very words of God, and to have our own opinions guided by the Holy Spirit himself. That our God would so guide each of us this morning, so we pray, "**Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth!**" Amen.

Obviously nothing good happens when man allows his opinions to determine his religious truths and convictions. When man formulates or creates his own religion, the truths of God's Word are never enhanced; they are always degraded. What results is never an improvement – for how could any product of the mind of man ever improve upon that which comes from God? On the contrary, what comes from man is always

hollow and superficial in comparison. Man makes religious fluff. He makes belief systems that have only the outward veneer of substance and truth and therefore make a mockery of that which is truly divine.

With that we join Paul in Athens – the setting of our text for this morning. Note that Paul was the first one to be "provoked," and that provocation was a good thing. What caused it? Our text tells us that Athens at that time was **"a city given over to idols."** This grieved Paul; it disturbed and saddened him. He couldn't just let it go – and neither should we. He recognized the terrible reality of where these human beings would spend eternity if something didn't change, so he offered them that change. Hear again how hard he worked at it: ***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.*** Some of the famous Athenian philosophers heard him there, and invited him to speak to them. Note how he began his message to them with what they undoubtedly took as a compliment: ***"Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious."*** This was, in reality, anything but a compliment from Paul. It was, to be sure, an acknowledgment that they were steeped in religious ideas, for we heard in our text that ***"all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new."***

But isn't that a good thing, to be very religious? The world supposes it is so, but not God. Not that kind of religious. Their brand of religious was a perversion and an abomination to God – something deserving of everlasting condemnation. He did not look on them favorably because they tried so hard – even to the point of erecting that altar ***TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.*** God condemned them for their unbelief and idolatry. God judges based on a human being's relationship with Jesus Christ, and on nothing else.

Hear this, and understand it well. God is never pleased by the observance of any man-made religion, which is idolatry. Man is the only one that takes pride in his religiosity. God is not pleased with anything false or misleading. The problem with the philosophers in Athens was, at least in part, that they were philosophers in Athens. Having plumbed the depths of their own minds, they came to the conclusion that they had actually been somewhere and had thereby accomplished something. And they congratulated each other accordingly.

We saw in our text what happened when they actually encountered true religion of a divine origin – they were baffled by it, ridiculed it, and dismissed it. They were provoked. Do you recall their words? ***"What does this babbler wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"--because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.*** Hear this well. Paul, a true Christian, was provoked,

disturbed, irritated, upset by their idolatry, and he knew that these human souls would have to be provoked, disturbed, irritated, upset by the truth of God's Word if they were to be rescued.

Their reaction isn't really all that strange, is it? In fact it is the typical reaction of man to that which is above and beyond his mortal intellect – especially anything that conflicts with the great "my." Paul could undoubtedly have ingratiated himself to the men of the Areopagus if he had just spouted some religious-sounding nothings like *"To do is to be"* or *"Man is the measure of all things"* or *"When you gaze long into the abyss, remember that the abyss is gazing back into you."* Had he said things like that, he probably would have been invited into the club and asked to return. As it was, they had pretty much heard all that they wanted to hear from him.

At what point did Paul lose them? When exactly did they turn away and lose interest? He lost them at the very point where his message departed from their rational point of view. That was the provocation, the point at which eternal life and death hung in the balance. Look back at what Paul had been telling them. He credited these men on their religious nature, remarking about their many altars. He went on to explain how he, Paul, knew all about the one they had missed and that he was going to tell them about him. No doubt the Athenians were all ears at that point. Any race of people so zealous to know and please every god that they would erect an altar to an unknown god (just in case) would be keenly interested in hearing all they could about that god. In other words, Paul began by speaking to them on their own level - with references to their everyday life and culture. All of these things the men of Athens could accept. They could tolerate the concept of a God who made heaven and earth, as well as a God that was not made out of ordinary materials. It was not, in fact, until Paul broached the first uniquely *Christian* (and illogical) truth that the men of Athens had any objection to what he was saying. That was the provocation, and the provocation had to come if these men were to be rescued. The soil of their sinful hearts had to be broken up if the seed of God's Word was to take root. In fact note that it took only *one* such Christian saying. One was enough. Paul had only to mention the resurrection of the dead and the Athenians had had enough.

Again, it was not as if these men weren't religious – they were *extraordinarily* religious. It was not as if these men were like the thugs in Thessalonica who started a riot over what Paul was preaching *because it interfered with their pocketbooks.* These were civilized, religious men – wise men... and therein lay their downfall. Hear this well. Their earthly wisdom and preconceived opinions served only to confirm them in their damning unbelief. There's a lesson there. Religion, piety, civility - none of these did the men of Athens any good

when it came to the life and death struggle between the gospel of Jesus Christ and the hollow ruminations of man. The very intelligence of these men proved to be their downfall.

This same damning tendency is alive and well in each one of us here. Recognize this in your own heart and the danger it poses to your eternal soul. Christians are continually tempted to abandon the simple truths of God's Word in favor of our own wisdom, logic, intuition - call it what you will. Every single Christian carries a natural idea or conception of what is true and right. Solomon warned of the inescapable results of following our own natural preconceived notions when he wrote by inspiration in Proverbs 14:12, "**There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.**" Hear those words well, for they reveal the subtle, terrible nature of the evil that resides in every one of us. This malevolence is so terrible because, as Solomon warned, it *does seem right* to us; it seems natural, true, even logical. Whatever therefore conflicts with what we naturally imagine to be right is in constant danger of being dismissed as false. That part of us also needs to be provoked regularly by the truth of God's Word.

Natural man is comfortable with certain elements of Christianity, but only until such truths begin to interfere with what his mind tells him is true. By nature you and I would have no trouble with kindness, gentleness, peace and the like. That, however, is neither the sum nor the basic substance of Christianity. Such things are products or fruits of Christianity. Christianity is much more, and herein lies one of critical lessons of our text. Note well that Paul *did* go on to say more. He provoked. He poked the stick of God's law into the hornets' nest of man's intellect. He could have meandered around in his speech to the Areopagus and never once offended them. What good would it have done them? Paul would simply have helped to confirm those blind souls in their unbelief. In fact every time any Christian gives the impression to an unrepentant sinner that all is well between him and his God, he confirms that eternal soul in his sins and in his unbelief. Every time you and I speak in "*I'm okay, you're okay*" terms to an unbeliever, we make him even more of an unbeliever. Here's the tragedy of today's one-size-fits-all religiosity: *Damned sinners could quite easily practice such a religion for a lifetime and never once hear what they need to hear to be turned and to be saved.* The simple, saving, illogical message they need to hear is that faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins is the one and only path to heaven.

Hear the words of Paul to the men of Athens each time you are tempted to compromise your witness: "**(God) has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained.**" The world needs desperately to hear this very message. A good life and pious conduct will save no one. Human souls will be saved or damned alone on the basis of Jesus Christ. "**He that believes and is baptized**

**shall be saved. He that believes not shall be damned.**" True saving faith is a precious gift created in our hearts only through the working of the Holy Spirit through his Word.

Praise God that he has given this great gift to you. A great change has been worked in you by God himself, for you too embrace that which is foolishness to the unconverted wise of this world. You possess, even now, the simple confidence that your sins stand forgiven before your righteous Creator because those sins were loaded upon Jesus and carried by him to the cross. There he paid for every single one of them. Rejoice then that this divine truth concerning Jesus Christ has also been revealed to you. This is the mystery of the gospel – folly to the world, but the great and powerful key to Life eternal for God's children. Amen.

## Scripture Readings

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Peter 3:13-22** Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? <sup>14</sup> But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, <sup>15</sup> but 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, <sup>16</sup> having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. <sup>17</sup> For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. <sup>18</sup> For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, <sup>19</sup> in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, <sup>20</sup> because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. <sup>21</sup> Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, <sup>22</sup> who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

<sup>ESV</sup> **John 14:15-21** "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, <sup>17</sup> even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. <sup>18</sup> ¶ "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. <sup>19</sup> Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. <sup>20</sup> In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. <sup>21</sup> Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him."

# ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Michael Roehl, Pastor Today's Organist: Eileen McEnroe

**The Seventh Sunday after Easter – May 21, 2017**

## The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

## The Opening Hymn – 23 (Stanzas 1-3) (Red Hymnal)

"Hallelujah, Let Praises Ring"

## The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

## The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

**The Epistle Lesson:** (1 Peter 3:13-22) The Holy Spirit through Peter once again reinforces God's desire that we follow His will in our lives, come what may. Good will certainly come of it. The greatest example is Jesus. The result of the good that Jesus did was the forgiveness of our sins through his payment of our sin-debt. Through baptism, Christ's payment becomes our own. Note also how the Holy Spirit here reminds us that each of us is called to "make a defense" of our Christian faith to any and all who may ask. Train continually for that mission.

## The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 84 (Page 38)

**The Gospel Lesson:** (John 14:15-21) Jesus here talks about the sending of the Holy Spirit following his Ascension (the event we commemorate on Thursday of this week). Having brought the new man to life in us, the Holy Spirit now lives within us. The natural result is the fruits of faith (or good works) in our lives.

## The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

## The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 500 (Verses 1-4) (Red Hymnal)

"May God Bestow on Us His Grace"

## The Sermon – Text: Acts 17:16-23, 31 (Printed on the back page)

**"Provoked"**

## The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

## The Post-Sermon Hymn – 290 (Red Hymnal)

"We Have a Sure Prophetic Word"

## The Offering

## The Prayers followed by the Lord's Prayer

## The Closing Hymn – 23 (Stanzas 4) (Red Hymnal)

"Hallelujah, Let Praises Ring"

## Silent Prayer

**Welcome!** - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

## Attendance – Sunday (29) Ave (46)

### This Week at St. Paul:

**Today** -9:00 a.m. – Sunday School and Bible Class

-10:00 a.m. – Sunday Worship Service

-11:00 a.m. – Fellowship/Coffee Time

-11:20 a.m. – Church Council Meeting

**Wednesday** -6:00 p.m. – Confirmation Class

-7:00 p.m. – Midweek Bible Study

**Next Sunday** -10:00 a.m. – Confirmation Sunday Worship

Service -11:30 a.m. – Fellowship Meal

**CLC News** – Teacher David Bernthal has returned the teaching call to Grace of Sleepy Eye. Messiah of Eau Claire has called Carly Meyer to teach grades 3-4 at its school. Faith of Markesan has called Teacher Neil Bernthal.

**Ruth Meyers Drive** – A reminder that the current collection for the Ruth Meyers House ends this Sunday. Please speak to Eileen McEnroe if you would still like to contribute.

**Confirmation Sunday** – Next Sunday, May 28, has been designated as Confirmation Sunday here at St Paul. As is our custom, the day's celebration will include a fellowship meal following the service.

**Church Picnic** – Our annual church picnic has been scheduled for Sunday, June 25. Time and location will be announced.

**Summer Schedule** – Today is the final Sunday before we enter our summer schedule, which means that Sunday School and Sunday Bible Class will be in recess until after Labor Day. Please note that we have one more mid-week Confirmation Class and Bible Study before they too go into summer recess.

**Delegates Needed** – St Paul is looking for two delegates to represent our congregation at the West Central Delegate Conference in Valentine, NE on May 31 – June 1. Please speak to President Mark Johnson if you would be willing and able to serve in this capacity.