

Part of being a Christian is engaging the world, and meeting people where they are at in life. This is not always easy because to do so means to put ourselves at risk of being swept along with the currents of worldly thinking. It is much easier for us to sequester ourselves, to build fortresses around ourselves, and try to hold the world at a distance. This idea of barricading ourselves has become quite popular in recent years with the resurgence of the Benedict Option, a classical monastic option which advises Christians to retreat from social entanglement in order to focus more on constructing a community within a community; a cluster of likeminded Christians set against the surrounding pagan world. I will say there is an appeal to this. After all, as we get older we get more and more disfranchised with the world; more and more soured to the rampant sin around us and its seeming impunity. But retreat is never the answer. The Christian lives by two truths: We are to hate the world enough to know it needs changing, and at the very same time love the world enough to want to change it. We are meant to engage the world in order to create space for God. But how this engagement takes shape has always been a sensitive topic.

Paul provides an answer to this question by way of his example. We meet Paul in Athens, the very epicenter of philosophical thinking. At its height, Athens was ground zero for scholars from all over the world to meet and debate. Novel ideas, new philosophies, and strange religions hung constantly in the air- communicating, congealing and converging. Think of a large and liberal university and you've got some idea of the marketplaces of Athens. We are told in our reading that Paul's spirit was provoked within him. He was moved by God to speak. Here we see engagement as the primary task of the spirit within us. God compels us forward to speak the truth in love to our neighbors. This is not an optional assignment but the very essence of our faith. Faith demands action. But let us take notice of how Paul does this. Because the how is just as important as the what. First notice how Paul knew his audience. He was familiar with their teachings. The leading philosophy of his day was Stoicism, and to a lesser degree Epicureanism. Many of the leading intellectual giants of the ancient world were stoic in orientation. Seneca, Cato, and the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius just to name a few. Paul engaged the audience by meeting them on the battlefield of philosophy. He did not try to force his Christian thought upon them, but rather he redirected their philosophical thoughts towards theology. This is important since so often Christians seem to have an ax to grind with the world coming across as defensive, combative, and narrow-minded with all their "God talk". These are titles we have earned by being uninformed and unaware of what makes people tick,

what gets them out of bed in the morning, what guides their thoughts, shapes their actions, directs their paths. In Paul's day stoicism provided the metanarrative. Stoicism can be boiled down to three fundamental principles all of which Paul addresses in his speech on Mars Hill. The *First Principle* of Stoicism is a desire to live in harmony with nature. The natural world has an order, a rhythm, a structure of which the stoic seeks to live in conformity with. Natural processes move everything along, and the stoic strives to move with its current and never against it. The *Second Principle* is to order human passions and desires as not to be ruled by them. This means that emotions are kept in check, and not allowed to be the deciding factor of any decision. By ruling the passions, a stoic can work towards a life unmoved by volatile feelings, like anger or lust. After all, it is not things in themselves that upset us, but rather our emotional reaction to those things that upset us. The *Third Principle* is reason is considered the highest faculty of man. Reason allows a person to live in balance, pursue virtue and avoid vice. Hence the focus on the four cardinal virtues of temperance, prudence, justice and fortitude. Each one of these virtues is about balance between two extremes. Courage is the balance between the extreme of reckless abandonment on one end and the extreme of cowardice on the other, temperance is the balance between being too hotheaded or too timid, prudence between wisdom and foolishness, justice between permissive condoning and strict legalism. Reason allowed the stoic to pursue the golden mean and by doing so live in harmony with himself and the natural world around him.

The fact that Paul was familiar with this stoic thought is apparent from his speech. He doesn't destroy the thought of stoicism, but redirects it towards a personal God. This is why we are told Paul "reasoned" with them on natural theology. After all, nature to the stoic is all about symmetry and structure. So much so that the world was called the *Kosmos*, which is a Greek word meaning beauty. But where does this order and structure and beauty come from? Is it blind force or random chance or the providential power of some Unknown God? Paul used a stepwise process of reason to move from natural order to a Divine architect, from motion and cause to the Uncaused, Unmoved Mover of all that exists. But He doesn't end with this thought. The stoics would have readily admitted that something guides all movement and provides structure to the universe be that Providence or Fate or some Unknown Deity. What Paul does is quite remarkable. He moves from some unknown something to a known and revealed Someone. From an unknown God to the revealed, personal God. He moves methodically from the

something we can know by natural reason to what is revealed only by God Himself. The stoic saw the purpose of life to live in harmony with nature. The aim was to reach a level of self-actualization or what they called *Eudaimonia* or flourishing. And this end goal directed their everyday thoughts and actions. This makes logical sense for whether you are building a house or playing a game of chess you have to have an endgame in mind before the beginning and middle parts can take shape. Paul uses this natural endgame of life to flourish by means of reason and self-harmony and directs it onwards to a higher, loftier vision. For man's natural end might just well be wholeness, but man's supernatural end is holiness with God Himself. And mankind achieves this blessed end by means of Christ, and His life, death and resurrection for all mankind. By ordering our lives around Christ instead of natural reason a Christian achieves all that the stoics sought in this life- purpose, direction, self-discipline, control, harmony, and inner peace through ordering the passions. But the Christian receives so much more than just a life of virtue. The Christian receives by grace through faith the gift of a life lived beyond our lifetimes. All of life then is a return to the God from whence we came; a return home to share knowledge, and communion with the God who made us and gave Himself for us in Christ.

Thinking about Paul's interaction with the Athenians provides a framework for us to interact with fellow Americans. Everywhere around us exists opportunities for engagement. Let us learn from Paul though to meet people where they are at. Not to destroy their humanity, but exalt it; not to dismiss their human nature, but elevate it. This happens not by Christian coercion, where we seek to argue someone into the kingdom of God, but genuine Christian conversion where the Holy Spirit is given free rein to enlighten, guide and clarify this world in light of the world to come. This of course is done through prayer, through patience, through listening, and ultimately through guiding worldly knowledge to a higher plane of meaning in God Himself. Amen.