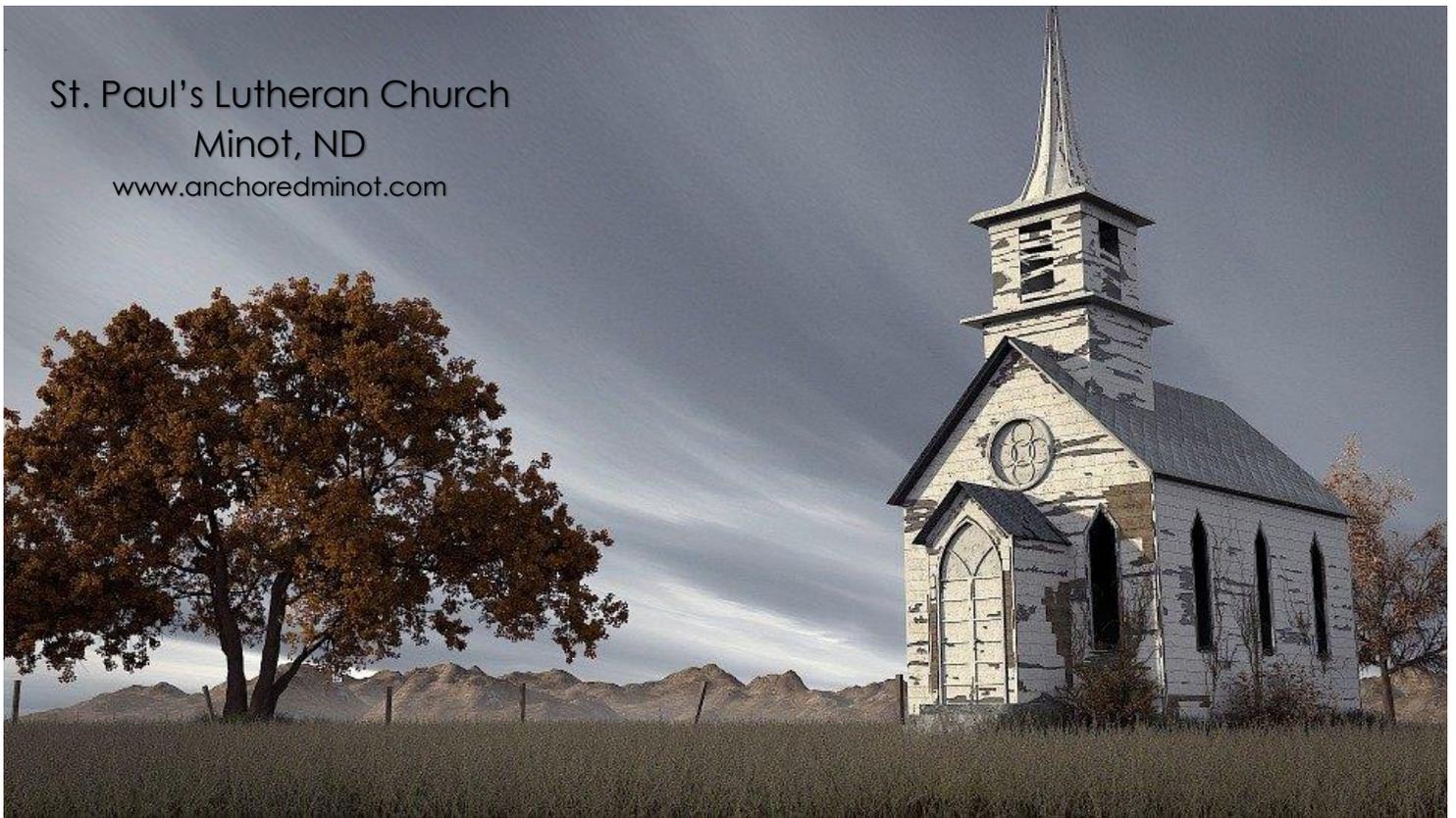


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# The Acts of the Apostles

The Ministry of the Gospel in a Messy Church & Conflicting World Acts 17:16-34

Many in America hold to the idea that a healthy church is a loving church. For them, a healthy church is solely about love, happiness, warmth, and smiles. Tragically, these individuals also believe that a healthy church will be kind, wishy-washy, and squishy with its interactions with the world. And so, every interaction with the world *must* be positive, uplifting, and non-argumentative.

What do we do with the Apostle Paul, though?

In Acts 17, Paul was in Athens. And as Paul wandered up and down the streets of Athens, he became livid. Paul got violently agitated – he burned with anger with a city filled with thousands of figures of Greek gods and goddesses. The American equivalent to how Paul felt would be the World War II military word, "Pissed Off." And so, in anger, Paul went to the synagogue and argued with the Jews. He also went into the marketplace and argued about false idols. In other words, Paul did not just shrug his shoulders and turn a blind eye. He called a spade a spade. His conversations took the form of debate.

And so, in this situation, it is clearly obvious that Paul would have sinned (i.e., omission) by keeping his mouth shut about obvious treachery. Furthermore, this shows that the absence of tension in a church may be because the Word of God has been lost. Yes, if a church does not have an ounce of tension over the scriptures but a plethora of love, it may not be a cause for celebration but for alarm.

C.F.W. Walther once said, "*...as soon as My Word is proclaimed, men will divide into two camps: some will receive it with joy, others will be offended by it and will begin to hate and persecute those who receive.*" Walther goes on to say, "*...the Church cannot be built up in peace; for it is located within the domain of the devil, who is the prince of this world. Accordingly, the Church has no choice but to be at war. It is ecclesia militans, the Church Militant, and will remain such until the blessed end. Wherever a Church is seen to be, not ecclesia militans, but ecclesia quiescens, a Church at ease, that--you may rely on it!--is a false Church.*"

Now, it is important to keep in mind that Paul most definitely debated and argued with people inside the

Church. But what about outside the walls of the Church? Interestingly, Paul went to the marketplace. Now, the marketplace was not a vacant lot but a place where art flourished (via sculptures) and a place where the debate of ideas and philosophy took place. It was a center of discussion, discourse, and ideas.

Every society, town, and culture seems to have a marketplace where ideas are discussed and debated. For small farming communities, the marketplace is the elevator or local Cenex station. In small towns, the marketplace is the local café. In larger cities, it may be the university. One of the most prominent marketplaces to emerge in the last ten years is most definitely Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube. To the point, we should expect the message of Christianity to *enter* into the marketplace of ideas. The Christian faith has always been evangelistic – reaching out into the marketplace of ideas.

After some debate in the marketplace, Paul was taken to Mars Hill for further debate. Besides Paul implementing what is called positive apologetics (*i.e., using sources from the current culture to build a case for Christ*), Paul also stated in 17:31, "[God] has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed." More specifically, the apostle Paul attempts to move the people from a morally inconsequential worldview to a morally consequential worldview. He was doing this to reveal their sin problem so that he might reveal the solution to sin, the real Jesus Christ. In other words, if there is no hell and if there is no Law, and if there is no judgment, then there is no problem and no consequence of sin (*i.e., inconsequential*). If there is no problem or consequence of sin, then a person does not need Christ. Indeed, faith cannot enter a heart that has not been crumpled. A person does not call for a doctor until he realizes he is sick. A lost sheep does not desire the shepherd until he knows he is lost. We cannot understand the Gospel unless we first hear about the problem of our sin. We cannot understand the assurance of Mount Calvary unless we have heard the thunder of Mount Sinai. We cannot appreciate the future blessedness of heaven without understanding the dreadful fiery threats of hell.

In the end, after Paul proclaimed Christian doctrine – Christ crucified and raised – some laughed at him and walked off making jokes, and others said, "*Let's do this again. We want to hear more!*" And that is the nature of evangelism and the Christian faith!





