

## ACTS 17:16-31

In each new location, Paul begins by proclaiming Jesus as the resurrected Messiah among Jewish people. Afterward, Paul turns to the Gentiles and likewise proclaims God's good news to them. So, like Paul in Romans, Luke never portrays God (or Paul) as writing off a group of people. Instead, throughout the New Testament, Jesus remains the Saviour for everyone who believes and follows him.

Paul's so-called "missionary journeys" do not follow precise itineraries or strategies as contemporary "mission trips" might. Instead of brief visits, Paul settles down in a community. Once there, Paul provides a faithful and ongoing witness of words and deeds until he is compelled to move, frequently due to persecution.

Arriving in Athens, Paul initially proclaims the good news among the Jews in the synagogue. Although mainly raised and educated in Jerusalem, Paul was born in Tarsus and ministered in Gentile territories. Greek and Roman religious expressions were not new to Paul. Yet, here Paul reacts strongly when he encounters the Athenians' extraordinary devotion to the gods.

Arriving in Athens, Paul becomes distressed over the many idols adorning the city. He decides not to wait for the arrival of his colleagues, Silas and Timothy in order to share God's good news with the Athenians. As has been his custom, Paul first visits the synagogues where he dialogues and debates with Jewish men and women as well as those devout persons (*hoi sebomenoi*) in attendance. However, he does not limit himself to the synagogues; he also speaks to the people gathered in the agora or marketplace.

Many Greeks and Romans believed the entire world belonged to the gods. As a result, humans inevitably trespass in the gods' domain and run afoul of them, often without realizing it. Yet, Greeks and Romans generally sought to maintain or restore peace with the gods through ritual practices and the offering of gifts, which formed the core of Greek and Roman religion.

Paul is “distressed” by the lengths to which the Athenians have gone to honour their gods. They have invested an inordinate amount of time and money into the hope that the gods would reciprocate their kindness and show them favour. Paul enters the marketplace daily to speak with the Athenians about God’s good and gracious news as opposed to an economy of religious reciprocity. In the process, he engages with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers while resembling a Greek philosopher himself in his manner and the style of argumentation.

The Athenians and foreigners who frequented the marketplace were accustomed to hearing and engaging with new philosophical and religious ideas. Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with Paul. Some concluded that Paul was a “Babbler.” That is, his message sounded piecemeal, like Paul had distributed crumbs of knowledge to them without the coherence and sophistication of the philosophers.

Some listeners think Paul refers to two new gods, that is Jesus and Resurrection, and they want to hear more. Others interpreted Paul’s words as promoting foreign divinities/religion because he spoke about the resurrection of Jesus. Neither party seemed to understand. In order for Paul to account for the perplexing intellectual and religious seeds he had scattered, The Greek philosophers take Paul to the Areopagus, the rocky hill below and to the west of the Acropolis, upon which the Parthenon sits. It seems that Paul is being forced to officially explain himself before the city council.

Paul affirms the Athenians’ religiosity by establishing some common ground between them. Despite his distress over the many idols in the city, Paul wisely refrains from demonizing their manner of religious expression. In the process of familiarizing himself with the religiosity of the Athenians, their idols and related accoutrements, Paul stumbled upon an altar inscribed with the words “To an unknown god.”

Paul astutely makes a hermeneutical and theological connection between the “unknown god” of the inscription and the God whom he proclaims created the world and everything in it. We might follow Paul’s example by seeking and appealing to the commonalties we share with those whom we wish to share God’s good news, rather than constructing

and highlighting our differences.

Conveniently, the Athenians had erected an altar for this “unknown god” but created no image. This absence of an image works well for Paul’s description of God as one who does not live in human-made shrines. Nor is God served or ministered to by humans as if God has a need or void that humans can fill. To say that God is “served by human hands” implies that God needs something from humans. Conversely, God gives everything to humans, including life and breath.

God does not need our service or worship. Worship and service are for the benefit of human beings. Therefore, we cannot bribe God with our service or our worship. But our service and worship should honour the God who created all human beings equally, without regard to gender, race, ethnicity, class, or orientation. We should treat one another with mutual dignity, justice, and parity in our service and worship.

The second point of common ground is the shared ancestry among human beings: From one, God made every nation of people to dwell on the face of the earth and he set the boundaries for their dwelling places. Therefore, all nations should seek God, feel after, and find God. God honours both our intellectual and emotive searching for God. God is not far from each one that God has created. God is equally available to and can be found by all whom God has created; that God shows no favouritism and is not more accessible to any one nation.

The third way that Paul identifies with the Athenians intellectually and theologically and meets them where they are is by invoking the Greek poets. Paul, as an educated Hellenistic Jewish man and a Roman citizen, is familiar with the Greek poets and with famous cultural expressions, two of which he quotes in his speech: “In him (the ‘unknown god’ who is also the God who created and sustains all) we live and move and have our being.”

And the verse “for we too are his offspring” is from Aratus a third-century BCE/BC poet. These two quotes reiterate what Paul has stated about God; the Greek poets had already testified about the relationship between God and all that God created and sustains.

In his sermon, Paul weaves together the good news about God with the writings of the Greek poets, creating an instance of intertextuality. Two texts are joined together in a new context (Paul's speech) to create a relevant text.

It is appropriate and necessary to dialogue with and create intertextualities in order to make the gospel relevant to people where they are situated. And sometimes this relevance-making involves broadening our intellectual reservoir so that we can draw parallels and find commonalities that we as humans share but that are not readily evident because of the differences we construct and the dualities we create (e.g., pagan/godly or heathen/Christian). One need not be a Christian to express truths about God.

Paul's differing presentations of the gospel to Jews in Antioch and Greeks in Athens remain instructive for Christians today. Paul sought to understand the people and the culture in which he resided. He sought to establish common ground and foster appreciation for others. As a result, he adapted his rhetorical style and his approach to ministry to the prevailing culture around him. Too often, Christians try to provide a witness to Jesus while undervaluing others and their cultures, at times even holding "others" in contempt. At the same time, Paul remained faithful to the central message that God's salvation, in all its forms, is manifest through Jesus and cemented by Jesus's resurrection from the dead. Christians are at their best when they cling to the truth of the gospel while embracing those around them.

There is an old Hindu legend, which addresses the hiddenness of God, which is the theme of this week's passage. It illustrates what Paul is doing in his speech to the Athenians by building a bridge between two religious systems and finding some commonality. This legend is about the creation of the world and concerns the Hindu high god, Brahma. I will refer to him simply as God. For when Hindus talk about Brahma, they are talking about much the same thing.

When God first created human beings, he meant for them to be divine beings. But, in his wisdom, God knew humanity was not yet ready for divinity.

He knew that, if given such power, they would use it to hurt one another and destroy the earth. So God decided to hide a piece of himself somewhere in the world where human beings would be able to find him when they were ready.

Now Christians and Hindu both believe in heavenly beings. We call them 'angels' and the Hindu refer to them as 'lesser gods.' Because we do not pray to angels and leave offerings to them, we must admit we are talking about very different things, so we will consider the heavenly beings to be 'angels.'

Now God called the angels together and told them, "The human beings I have created are not ready to be like us so I have decided to hide a piece of myself somewhere in creation. When they find this piece of God, they will be able to become like us so they must not find it until they are truly ready. So where shall I hide it?"

One of the angels suggested: "Why don't we bury the piece of God deep within the earth?" "I thought of that," said God, "but it won't be long before they begin to greedily mine the earth for its treasures. Were they to stumble upon the piece of God then, they would not be ready."

"Then put it on the furthest island across the sea," said another angel. "I thought of that too," said God, "But it won't be long after they start mining, that people will begin to explore the oceans looking for lands to conquer and people to enslave. Were they to stumble on the piece of God then, they would not be ready."

"Then put it on the moon," said yet another angel, "Surely they will not ascend to the moon until they are truly ready for divinity!" "But, alas," said God, "Not long after they have been to every land on earth, they will begin to build rockets to destroy one another. If they should ride one of these rockets to the moon, they would still not be ready."

All was silent in heaven. It occurred to the divine beings that maybe humanity would never be ready to join them and that the piece of God was a bad idea after all.

Then the wisest of the divine beings spoke.

“The piece of God should be broken into billions of pieces. And each piece should be hidden deep within each human being. For the heart is the one place they will never think to look until they are truly ready.” Brahma/ ‘God’, smiled in agreement and so it was.

Paul’s speech in Acts provides biblical warrant for the belief that all truth is ultimately God’s truth. Paul is not afraid to read, contemplate, or quote unbelieving Greek authors. Instead, Paul implies that those pagan authors have caught glimpses of God’s revealed truth, even if they do not know God’s name yet. Some Christians fear education, differing cultures, and dialogue with unbelievers. Paul is more concerned with understanding and proclaiming God’s truth than with isolating himself from the world around him.

Throughout Acts, Luke highlights a proper human response to God, which includes belief, repentance, baptism, and the descent of the Holy Spirit, in no set order. The heart of the gospel in this chapter of Acts revolves around what God does for humans. Unlike the worship of the Greek and Roman gods, where humans seek to establish peace with the gods, Paul proclaims that the God, manifest in the resurrected Jesus, overlooks human ignorance and seeks to establish peace with all people.

Paul concludes his speech by arguing that as God’s offspring the Athenians should adjust their view of the deity to match his status as creator-God. God should not be confused with the things or persons he has created; God cannot be contained in human-made substances like silver, gold, or stone, regardless of how precious they might be. And God cannot be made into human-conceived images.

There is a vast difference between rejecting something another holds dear and rejecting the person. We live in a day of religious pluralism. We live in a day of “spiritual but not religious.” We live in a day of an individualized, privatized cafeteria approach to picking and choosing what we “like” from different religious, political, and philosophical worldviews, often in ways that contain no logical consistency.

We live in Luke's version of Athens. Paul's Areopagus speech, then, offers a helpful analogy for how the church should live in this new day. Simply saying the church is in but not of the world may not be enough.

The manner of the church's engagement with the world modelled in this passage is one in which the church respects society and different expressions of it and speaks to the world on terms the world will respect. It recognizes good religious intent and desire in society. Still, however, the church presents its own unique faith for others to consider, offering an invitation for those interested and willing to join us. It is no wonder this passage has been so heavily used by the church through the years as a model for apologetics and evangelism.

Note that Paul does not condemn those who do not convert. He simply leaves. Luke does not say he left in a huff, so much as he simply indicates it was time for Paul to go, so he did. We should not expect our faith to resonate with all those with whom we share it, and it is not our place to condemn those who choose a different path. We welcome those who desire to join us and hopefully open ourselves to further conversation with those willing to engage us again.

**Amen.**

### **PRAYER OF THE DAY**

God of the unknown, your mysteries are astounding. Give us knowledge where you see fit, and let us sit comfortably with that which we can never understand. **Amen.**