



Building the church

A sermon series on the Gospel of Acts

Making Known The Unknown

Acts 17:16-34

16 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.

17 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. 18 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. 19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?”

20 For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. 22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 23 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.

24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,

28 for “‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ 29 Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. 30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he 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.”

32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.”
33 So Paul went out from their midst. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

- Acts 17:16-34



Paul's Aeropagus Sermon

vss 22-24: You worship an unknown God → I can tell you who He is.

vs 24: God made the world → therefore He cannot be contained in temples.

vs 25: God gives us life → therefore we are dependent on Him.

vs 28-29: We are God's offspring → therefore idols made of gold and stone cannot truly represent Him.

vs 30-31: God commands repentance → because He has appointed a Judge.

vs 31: That Judge is Jesus → and God proved it by raising Him from the dead.

Main idea: Paul grabs on to Athenian cultural assumptions to proclaim the message of repentance.

16-21: Context: The Athenian Culture

22-23: Opening Introduction

24-29: Four Points of Contact

The greatness of God: the creator

The goodness of God: the sustainer and provider

The sovereignty of God: he governs and ordains history

The nearness of God: he is knowable and near to us

30-31: Concluding appeal: The grace of God: He has sought us; therefore, repent.

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. 17 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. 18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him.

- Acts 17:18

Epicurean Worldview

Essential Teaching: the point of life was to maximise pleasure and avoid pain.

Goal: to find peace and happiness in this life by freeing themselves from pain, fear and unnecessary desires.

Foundational Beliefs:

- The gods, if they exist, are detached from human affairs.
- There is no need to fear divine judgment.
- The universe operates according to natural processes.
- Death should not be feared because we cease to exist as conscious beings.
- The wise person seeks a peaceful, moderate life rather than excessive pleasure.

Stoic Worldview

Essential Teaching: to rise above pain through self-discipline.

Goal: to live in harmony with reason and nature, this happens through developing virtue and accepting what happens beyond your control.

Foundational Beliefs:

- The universe is governed by a rational divine principle, often described as the Logos.
- Self-control and virtue.
- Living according to reason.
- Accepting one's circumstances.
- A divine rational order underlying creation.
- Humanity's is deeply connected to the divine order.

22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 23 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.

- Acts 17:22-23

15 Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise,
16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.
17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will
is.

- Ephesians 5:15-17

What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

-Acts 17:23

Four Biblical Assertions

- **The greatness of God as the creator of everything:**
 - 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, (Acts 17:24)

Four Biblical Assertions

- **The greatness of God as the creator of everything.**
- **The goodness of God as sustainer and provider.**
 - 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. (Acts 17:25)

The Lord upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down. 15 The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. 16 You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing. 17 The Lord is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works.

- Psalm 145:14-17

Four Biblical Assertions

- **The greatness of God as the creator of everything.**
- **The goodness of God as sustainer and provider.**
- **The sovereignty of God: he governs and ordains history**
 - 26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place (Acts 17:26)

for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me,¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,'

- Isaiah 46:9-10

Four Biblical Assertions

- **The greatness of God as the creator of everything.**
 - **The goodness of God as sustainer and provider.**
 - **The sovereignty of God: he governs and ordains history**
 - **The nearness of God: he is knowable and near to us**
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- 27 that ("therefore", "for this purpose") they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, 28 for "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring." 29 Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.- Acts 17:27-29

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. 19 He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them. 20 The Lord preserves all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.

-Psalm 145:18-20

Four Biblical Assertions

- **The greatness of God as the creator of everything (vs 24).**
- **The goodness of God as sustainer and provider (vs 25).**
- **The sovereignty of God: he governs and ordains history(vs 26)**
- **The nearness of God: he is knowable and near to us (vs 27-29)**

30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he 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.”

- Acts 17:30-31

Questions To Ponder

- How well do we understand the worldviews and foundational beliefs of those around us?
- Are we provoked or deeply troubled by the assumptions of those around us?
- Do we, like Paul, take the time to ponder how we can draw a line from cultural touchpoint to Jesus?