

## **Lessons from Paul's Visit to Athens** **Acts 17:16-34**

**Main Idea:** By observing how Paul evangelized the influential city of Athens, we find some important lessons about engaging unbelievers today.

- I. What Paul Saw (17:16)**
- II. What Paul Felt (17:16)**
- III. Where Paul Went (17:17-18)**
  - A. The Synagogue (17:17a)
  - B. The Marketplace – Dialoguing with People in General (17:17b)
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- IV. What Paul Said – At the Areopagus (17:19-34)**
  - A. God is creator (17:24)
  - B. God is the sustainer of life (17:25)
  - C. God is the ruler of the nations (17:26)
  - D. God is knowable (17:27)
  - E. God is the Father of humanity (17:28-29)
  - F. God is both the Judge and Rescuer (17:30-31)
  - G. What were the results? (17:32-34)

We join Paul now in the city of Athens. We once again see Paul's incredible evangelistic versatility. He reminds me of the current MLB "switch-pitcher," Pat Venditte, who throws with both hands, and even switches between batters! One newspaper sports reporter declared, "He's amphibious!" (I think he meant ambidextrous!). Paul was an ambidextrous evangelist; he was about to adapt to the Jews and pagans, throwing gospel strikes, with both his right and left hand, you might say. He could switch approaches from the synagogue to the marketplace, preaching the same gospel in a way that is admirable and exemplary.

This experience is one of the most popular stops along Paul's missionary journeys, and one of the most popular passages in the entire book of Acts, Paul's visit to Athens. Polhill comments on the significance of this passage saying, "Paul's brief visit to Athens is a centerpiece for the entire book of Acts" (365). Indeed it is a "centerpiece," giving us insight into the heart and ministry of Paul, thereby providing us with very important lessons for engaging unbelievers today.

Luke provides us with a bit of a look at the city of Athens, and then focuses our attention on Paul's speech at the Areopagus. This speech shows us an example of how Paul evangelized Gentiles, who had virtually no background in Scripture. The other example of Paul preaching to pagan Gentiles was found in Paul's speech in Lystra (Acts 14:15-17). In both cases, Paul starts with creation and moves forward in the redemptive story. He also addresses and confronts idolatry.

Athens was in the “late afternoon of her glory” when Paul arrived (in Boice, 293). Corinth was now the center of commerce and politics in Greece. The golden age of Athens – the fifth century – was gone. After achieving impressive military victories, Athens flourished economically and culturally between 480-404BC like few nations have ever flourished. Politically, they had developed the first democracy, a city-state run by elected officials who were accountable to the people. Athens also had “whose who” in almost every category of western civilization. Great Playwrights like Aeschylus (the father of tragedy) was there. Athens was home to the fathers of history, Herodotus and Thucydides. Hippocrates, another 5<sup>th</sup> century Athenian, has been called “The Father of Western Medicine.” And we must mention Socrates, the father of western philosophy, who taught Plato, who later taught Aristotle – each giant once graced the city of Athens. Numerous artists also called Athens home. The most celebrated sculptor/painter/artist of this era was Phidias, whose statue of Zeus was considered one of the wonders of the world. Phidias also designed the majestic statue of Athena inside the Parthenon. Temples, designed by other artists, lined the streets, with the most impressive building in the city being the famous Parthenon (completed around 432BC).

In every ancient Greek city, the highest point of elevation housed a temple to some god or goddess, usually the patron god of the city (Sproul, 306). These locations were known as a “high cities,” or to the Greeks the *acropolis*. *Acro* meaning “height,” from which we get words like acrobatics and acrophobia, and *polis* meaning “city.” Such high places are found back in antiquity also, as we read about in the Old Testament. The high elevation gave a feeling of supremacy, and closeness to the gods. Athens was no different. Athena was the patron goddess of the city, whose enormous statue stood high inside the Parthenon. Today, when visiting Athens, can’t miss the magnificent remains of the Parthenon located high in the center of the city.

About fifty yards from the Parthenon was a little hill about fifty feet high, about a 150 yards long, where a temple was built to the Greek god of war “Ares” who corresponded to the Roman god of war, Mars; hence the names *Aeropagus*, or *Mars Hill*. Paul speech in verses 22-31 may have taken place on that platform (depending on how we understand *Areopagus*).

Even though the golden age had past, Athens was still an impressive city when Paul visited it. Polhill says, “It was still considered the cultural and intellectual center of the Roman Empire, and it is in this perspective that Luke portrayed it” (365-66). It was also still strikingly beautiful. Paul had surely heard about the majestic Athens since he was a boy, but now he was there, as he waited on his companions to join him (17:16). How would he respond to this grandeur and history and these competing worldviews? Tertullian’s question comes to mind: “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” Athens was the home of pagan Greek philosophy, and Jerusalem was home to divine revelation. We might wonder the same thing. How should we, as Christians, interact with a pluralistic society? How should we engage skeptical intellectuals in particular?

To learn from Paul's visit, let's look at what Paul *saw*, what Paul *felt*, where Paul *went*, and what Paul *said* (at the Areopagus). Each point is related, and vitally important if we desire to imitate the apostle. Stott put it well: "We do not *speak* like Paul because we do not *feel* like Paul; this is because we do not *see* like Paul" (290, my emphasis).

#### #1: What Paul Saw (17:16)

Here's how Luke describes what Paul's reaction to the grandeur of Athens: "While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, his spirit was troubled within him when he *saw* that the city was full of idols" (17:16, my emphasis).

It wasn't the history, the tourists, or the beauty of Athens that first struck Paul. While Paul surely admired some things about the city, and respected its history, what struck him most was the *idolatry* in Athens (17:16). Paul viewed the city differently than others. He looked at the city *Christianly*.

It's here that we see an illustration of what it means to have a *Christian worldview*. Goheen and Bartholomew define worldview as "an articulation of the basic beliefs embedded in a shared grand story that are rooted in a faith commitment and that give shape and direction to the whole of our individual and corporate lives" (*Living at the Crossroads*, kindle). A worldview is a set of beliefs about the most fundamental issues in life, such as *origin, meaning, morality, and destiny* embedded in a grand narrative.

When a person truly becomes a Christian it also transforms how they *see* everything! Why? Because we have a set of beliefs embedded in the storyline of the Bible – *creation, fall, redemption, and consummation* – these beliefs and this storyline shapes our view of the world.

In other words, faithful Christians wear a different set of glasses than non-Christians. We enjoy many of the same things in the world, but we see them differently. We see the arts differently; we listen to music differently; we think about sports differently; we view business differently; we view race differently; we view the poor, the orphan and the widow differently; we view the ocean differently; we view people differently; we hear the birds differently; we view money differently; we view sex differently; we view marriage differently; we view food and drink differently; we view death differently. We see the world differently because we see it through the lens of God's revelation in creation, Scriptures, and ultimately in His Son. Paul's worldview determined how he saw everything.

Everyone has a worldview. In Athens, Luke mentions two competing worldviews in particular, the Epicureans and Stoics. But there are many different ways to see the world. Even your neighbor next door may see issues radically different from you because they have a different set of beliefs, as James' Sire's book title suggests, *The Universe Next Door*. The question is, is your worldview true and coherent, and do you consistently apply it to everything.

One of things we learn to see with a Christian worldview is that the world is filled with *idols*. We begin to see that underneath sin problems, relational problems, and intellectual problems is a

profound *worship* problem. Luther said that if you get the first commandment right, the others would follow, because everything follows this fundamental issue of worship.

Some have said that it was “easier to find a god in Athens than a person.” The marketplace was lined with idols. The phrase “full of idols” (17:16) carries the idea of being “under idols” or “smothered in idols” (Stott, 277). This sight of people exchanging the glory of the Creator for created things radically impacts Paul, leading him to engage the Athenian citizens with the gospel. We too should long to see our neighbors and the nations replace idols with the Living God (1 Thess 1:9-10). For we too live in a world smothered in idols.

What are the idols in your city? An idol is anything we look to give us what only Jesus can give us. What are people looking to for joy, satisfaction, meaning, and significance? What are they hoping in? What are they afraid of? What are they trusting in? An idol isn't merely expressed through pagan shrines and images; idolatry is a heart issue. It's looking to a substitute god, a functional Savior, instead of the true and living God. An idol could be peer approval, success, money, sex, pleasure, food, sports, education, power, entertainment, and more. Our responsibility is to first destroy these idols in our life, and then to discern them in our culture, so that we show our friends that these idols won't satisfy the human heart (Ps 16:4). We need to show our friends that idols only multiply sorrows, and then we must point people to the God who made them and can redeem them, through Jesus Christ.

## #2: What Paul Felt (17:16)

Becoming a Christian also entails a change in one's *feelings*. We become affected at a deep level by things. Jesus is called a “man of sorrows, acquainted with grief” (Isa 53:3). He wept and got enraged (Jn 11:33-35). Paul too speaks of emotions in numerous places, writing things like, “as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor 6:10). So it shouldn't surprise us – but should challenge us – when Luke writes of Paul, “his spirit was *troubled* within him when he saw that the city was full of idols” (17:16, my emphasis).

The word “troubled” (HCSB) or “greatly distressed” (NIV) or “provoked” (ESV) comes from an interesting word in Greek. It's hard to translate into an English expression. It's the word *paroxynō*, from which we get our word “paroxysm” – as in a seizure, spasm, or outburst. Some try to simply translate this as “anger.” They say that Paul was “infuriated” at the idolatry of Athens. But I think that's only a part of it.

The best way to understand this verb is to look to the Old Testament. This term appears in the Greek version of the Old Testament to describe how God feels about idolatry. When the Israelites worshiped idols, they “provoked” the Lord to righteous anger. But this anger is also mingled with *love* (cf., Isaiah 65:1-7; Deut 9:7). Why is it that God wanted His people to worship Him alone – because He loved them. God has a holy love for His people. I submit that Paul

shared a mixture of righteous indignation for the Name of God, and broken-hearted compassion for the people who worshiped false gods. He was motivated by love for God and neighbor.

It's clear in the passage that Paul is zealous for God's name, like an Old Testament prophet (1 Kings 17). But what's often overlooked is Paul's tone and demeanor in Athens, which displays compassion. Just look at how Paul relates to the Athenians. In the very next verse, it says Paul "reasoned" with the people (17:17). So his feelings didn't lead him to angrily take a sledgehammer to the idols! Instead, in holy love, he engaged, listened, heard, dialogued, and debated. That takes gentleness, respect, and compassion. In the speech at the Areopagus, he also demonstrated respect (17:22).

The problem with many Christians is here: *the heart*. If your life doesn't reflect both sweetness and thunder, you will either be a coward or obnoxious. Some people are good at the ministry truth, but terrible at the ministry of tears (Keller, "A World of Idols"). We need both gentleness *and* boldness. Who displayed this best? Jesus. Jesus rebuked people boldly; but he was also gentle. Isaiah said of the truth-telling, truth-embodiment Savior, "A bruised reed he will not break" (Isa 42:3).

Now, we need to realize how important Paul's example is for us today. How can you engage people effectively in your "marketplace?" You need this type of commitment to truth, and this type of compassion for people. In the Western world, we tend to overemphasize *career* and *location*; when the Bible places the emphasis on *character*. If God can work in you this type of heart – a heart for God and for people – then you will be effective in society, and live a life filled with eternal meaning and profound joy.

In Psalm 67, the Psalmist captures this desire to see the nations worship the Lord. Remember the Psalms reflects the deep heart of a praying worshiper. It's with this heart for the nations, and this passion to see God worshiped as He alone deserves, that he writes:

May God be gracious to us and bless us  
and make his face to shine upon us, *Selah*  
that your way may be known on earth,  
your saving power among all nations.  
Let the peoples praise you, O God;  
let all the peoples praise you!  
Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,  
for you judge the peoples with equity  
and guide the nations upon earth. *Selah*  
Let the peoples praise you, O God;  
let all the peoples praise you! (Ps 67:1-5, ESV)

Do you long to see people sing for joy to the Creator and Redeemer? If not, then the question is how can I grow in my feelings toward others?

The answer lies in this: mediate on the cross of Jesus. At the cross of Jesus, we see God's absolute commitment to perfect holiness, and we also see His unfathomable compassion for

sinner. The more we think about the cross, the more we will grow in truthfulness and tears; in gentleness and boldness; in holiness and love. Paul saw the world differently, and he felt differently about the idols of the world because his worldview was radically cross-centered (1 Cor 1:17-31). If you don't have the cross in central to your worldview, then you will end up being too accepting or too demanding. The cross gives us the heart we need to engage the Athenians in our lives.

### #3: Where Paul Went (17:17-18)

Luke records Paul evangelizing in three different places: the synagogue, the marketplace, and then finally to the Areopagus, where he delivers a formal address. He intentionally goes to the first two places; he's brought to the third place. Let's consider his ministry in the synagogue and marketplace.

We should admire and seek to imitate Paul's flexibility and range in evangelism. The fact is, in America, we live in a nation filled with great spiritual diversity. Some parts of the nation have no knowledge of the Bible, or of basic Christian concepts. In some other parts, there's a general understanding of the faith – of at least some of the Christian vocabulary. In some areas, you find both extremes present, depending on what group of people you're engaging. In Raleigh, we have some people who are generally aware of Christian ideas, but we have others (University students, internationals, youth, etc), who have absolutely no idea what we mean when we say words like "God," "sin," "Heaven," "redemption," and so on. D.A. Carson said that when ministering to university students, he finds an increasing number of students that don't even know that the Bible has two testaments (Carson, "The Cross and Christian Ministry").

Carson illustrated the diversity of America with two recent seminary graduates. One planted a church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where the student told him that it took him a whole year before he met someone would confess to *not* being a Christian! But another student went to plant a church in Washington, D.C. and found things to be totally different. In a little survey to incite conversation, the young planter ask surveyors to do a word association activity, connecting a word on the left column with a word on the right column. The number one connection with the word "Christian" was the word "bigot" ("Lessons"). The young man in Tulsa had sort of a "synagogue ministry" – expounding the Bible to those who were familiar with some it. The young man in D.C. had a "marketplace ministry." Let's look at how Paul engaged both types of audiences.

***The Synagogue (17:17a).*** As was his custom, Paul starts off in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons. To those familiar with the Old Testament, Paul "reasoned" with them from the Scriptures (17:17a), explaining and proving that Jesus was the Messiah (cf., 17:12-3).

This should go without saying, but if you are in a "churchy-setting," make sure the gospel is being preached *explicitly* every week. Don't assume that church attenders are family members.

Make the gospel your priority if you're a youth ministry, a children's worker, a Sunday School teacher, a volunteer, a small group leader, a pastor, a worship leader, or whatever else you may do to serve the Lord's church.

Many "religious people" aren't Christians. I remember preaching at a church in Mississippi several years ago when this priority really struck me. A seventy-year old man handed out bulletins every week. He "grew up" in the church. Yet, he wasn't a believer. But one Sunday when I preached on the necessity of being "born again" from John 3, the Lord opened his heart and he trusted Christ. He told me later, "When I was a kid, a man said to me, "Don't you think it's time for you to join the church?" And so he did. But he had never repented and trusted in Christ. Proclaim the gospel to the religious!

***The Marketplace: Dialoguing with People in General (17:17b)***. Luke says that Paul reasoned "in the marketplace everyday with those who happened to be there" (17:17b). Here, in the hub of Athenian culture, a place of commerce public dialogue, Paul engaged the Athenians. He didn't wait on the Sabbath day to preach the gospel, but rather, day-by-day he mixed it up in the *agora* (the marketplace), dialoguing with individuals. Stott says, "He seems deliberately to have adopted the famous Socratic method of dialogue, involving questions and answers; he was, in fact, a kind of Christian Socrates, although with a better gospel than Socrates ever knew" (280).

Now we don't have a good equivalent with the agora. It contained everything: town officials deliberating; artists creating; business people dealing; the media reporting (there were no newspapers); the philosophers debating (there were no journals, or computers with which to do research). Everything happened in the marketplace. It was the public space for everything. You shopped for everything in the marketplace. It was more than a mall.

Paul goes here with his faith. Why? It's because Christianity is a public faith. The Scriptures never teach that our faith should *not* impact the marketplace. The writer of Proverbs says in the first chapter, "Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the marketplace she raises her voice" (Prov 1:20). Paul lives out his faith, and communicates his faith everyday in the public center of ideas.

We too should take our faith public by the way we live, and by the way we talk. Paul engaged people in dialogue. He didn't start a riot; he started a conversation. We should follow this pattern.

Now you don't have to be familiar with the Socratic method of teaching (a form of discussion-oriented teaching based on answering and asking questions), to understand the importance and using questions in marketplace. Just read through the gospels and notice how often Jesus uses questions. You may start off with basic questions, and then move to more serious questions with people. Learn the art of dialogue in order to be an effective evangelist. Sometimes timid believers will admit, "I don't know what to say in evangelism." That's okay. Just have in your arsenal some good questions to ask. You might be surprised at what happens in the conversation.

We can take our faith to the marketplace in the ordinary rhythm of life, as we go school, to the gas station, the grocery store, to sporting events, walk the neighborhood, interact with co-workers, and hang out with family members (I love the example of Naaman taking his faith public in his vocation in 2 Ki 5:15-f.). These daily meetings are occasions for gospel conversations. But we should also find the “third places” where people hang out, talk, and play. Get where people are and engage them – day by day.

***The Marketplace: Dialoguing with Intellectual Skeptics in Particular (17:18)***. Luke goes on to mention others that Paul conversed with in the city, “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” (17:18). Some of the philosophers called Paul a “babbler” (a “pseudo-intellectual, HCSB). *Babbler* meant “seed-picker.” It was used of various seed-eating or scavenging birds (Stott, 282). The philosophers compared Paul to a bird, just picking up an idea here or there, but having nothing really coherent to say.

These philosophers valued a coherent worldview to life. The problem here wasn’t that Paul was doing a poor job; it’s the fact that the philosophers couldn’t understand Paul’s categories. They accuse him of advocating “foreign gods.” Because they couldn’t grasp Paul’s understanding of God, the world, and salvation – only picking up bits and pieces of his message – they smugly consider him a babbler. The fact that they didn’t understand Paul’s worldview is demonstrated by the fact that they thought the *resurrection* (*anastasis* in Greek) referred to Jesus’ female consort. In Greek thought, many Greek deities bore the names of abstract qualities (like Fate, Mercy, Effort, and Shame), they apparently assume *resurrection* is a similar (and lesser) deity.

What types of philosophers was Paul engaging? While there were many in the city that loved talking about ideas (17:21), two particular schools of thought are mentioned in verse 18: Epicurean and Stoic philosophies.

Epicureans were materialists. They believed that the body and even the soul were composed of fine matter, which dissolves after death. They believed the gods to be totally indifferent to human actions. Epicureans didn’t believe in divine providence. And they considered a person wise who neither feared divine judgment nor eternal reward. The best way to imitate the gods, for the Epicureans, was to enjoy pleasure – not gross idolatry – but pleasure nonetheless. “You only live once – if it feels good, do it” captures a bit of this spirit. They pursued this sort of detached and tranquil life apart from pain, in pursuit of pleasure, as they thought the gods lived. We use the term *epicurean* to refer to things like fine food and wine, to describe one who has luxurious tastes and habits.

Stoics, on the other hand, were pantheists. They thought a divine principle was immersed in all of nature, including human beings. This spark of divinity, the *logos*, was the cohesive rational principle that bound the entire cosmic order together. They confused god with the “world soul,” and thought the world was determined by fate. A wise person recognizes his connection with



everything else in the universe, cultivating an attitude of self-sufficient contentment, regardless of circumstances. You live with a stiff upper lip, responding calmly to everything. To pursue your highest good, you live by reason. Further, for the Stoics, history was viewed as an unending cycle of ordered, followed by chaos, followed by order. They would applaud Paul's emphasis on God's nearness, but would reject the notion that history was moving to a culminating point (Johnson, 219-20). The phrase, "que sera, sera," "what will be, will be" captures this spirit, or "Just grin and bear it, there's nothing you can do about it."

Stott says, "To oversimplify, it was characteristic of Epicureans to emphasize chance, escape and the enjoyment of pleasure, and of the Stoics to emphasize fatalism, submission and the endurance of pain." (281). In other words, one group said, "Grin and bear it; there's nothing you can do about it," and the other group said, "If it feels good, do it; there are no consequences." Both worldviews were quite hopeless and very meaningless. And both worldviews are very prevalent in today's world of *skepticism*.

We live in a similar intellectual climate, where no one seems to care about ultimate truth, meaning, and salvation. They live, like these philosophies teach, for the "here and now." Moreover, those who are the skeptics are considered the *intellectuals*. Anyone who believes in the God of the Bible, and the way of salvation, is obviously unlearned, naive and primitive.

The growing number of "nones" illustrates this lack of desire for eternal, ultimate matters. The "nones" are those people who classify themselves as having "no religious affiliation." About 1/3 of adults under the age of thirty align themselves in this category, the highest percentage ever, according to Pew Research ([www.pewforum.org](http://www.pewforum.org)). They live life without any real sense of God. But Paul gives us a mighty example of engaging such a culture that tries to live apart of the God of the Bible.

Where may we engage the skeptical intellectuals today, who live for the here and now only? Obviously, our minds think about the great academic institutions. We desperately need good Christian thinkers to argue with the intellectuals in colleges and universities. But skepticism and hedonism is found throughout culture. So we need Christians in every arena of culture, who live and preach the Christian worldview in a way that's winsome. You don't have to be a pastor to influence culture. You can do so in the world of film, music, art, journalism, science, education, law, politics, and more. We must not retreat from culture; we must engage humbly, boldly, and intelligently.

#### #4: What Paul Said – At the Areopagus (17:19-34)

In light of Paul's teaching, the philosophers lead him to the Areopagus (17:9a) in order for Paul to further explain himself and give a defense of his message. The *Areopagus* can refer to either a *court* called the Areopagus or a *hill* called the Areopagus (*Mars Hill* to the Romans). Sometimes it may refer to both due to the fact that the court traditionally met on that particular hill (Polhill, 367). Athenians would often assemble here to debate and decide affairs.

The philosophers say to Paul, “May we learn about this new teaching you’re speaking of? For what you say sounds strange to us, and we want to know what these ideas mean” (17:19b-20). So the sermon/defense that follows, is a response to this question: “What do these ideas mean?”

Luke adds one final note to give us some additional flavor of Athens saying, “Now all the Athenians and the foreigners residing there spent their time on nothing else but telling or hearing something new” (17:21). Like many in our modern era, the Athenians loved *new* things. But they didn’t need new ideas; they needed new life!

People today love to watch the *news*, get the *newspaper*, listen to *new* music, see *new* movies, buy the *newest* clothing style, make *new* discoveries, and so on. Of course, enjoying new things isn’t necessarily wrong. The problem is, some things are unchanging. The gospel is an unchanging, old message. But many still want to edit the gospel, and give some new twist to it. A man at the University of Manchester got his PhD in New Testament with the thesis that Jesus was really the founder of a phallic mushroom cult (Sproul, 310). Sproul commented on this new idea, “That is new, but it is also ridiculous” (310). Be careful of overemphasizing new things; and remember that the gospel is the old, old, story that has the power to give people *new life*. If you change it, you destroy it. It may fascinate, but it won’t transform. At the Areopagus, Paul now has the opportunity to give the Athenians this unchanging message.

Paul first establishes *a point of contact* and a point of conflict with the Athenians. He begins saying: “Then Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect” (17:22). Paul first identifies with their religious interest. Paul understands that man is “incurably religious,” that is, wherever you go you will find some sort of religion practicing today. The atheist may say “God does not exist,” but the truth is, creation and conscious testify to God’s existence, and they simply don’t like God (Ibid., 310). They suppress the truth about Him (Rom 1).

Paul then establishes *a point of conflict* saying, “For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD “ (17:23). In the synagogue, Paul’s text was the Old Testament; in Athens it was an inscription. A number of ancient visitors to Athens reportedly saw altars with such an inscription (Boice, 297). Paul’s point of conflict was quite obvious: God has revealed Himself! God is not unknowable. Paul’s speech goes on to describe *the revelation of God*, and how the problem is not that we can’t know God, but that we don’t want to know Him. As someone quipped, the common atheist is really saying, “There’s no god, and I hate Him.”

So Paul preaches now, “what these things mean.” Luke records what is probably the skeleton of Paul’s speech. Carson says that Areopagus speeches had a reputation for lasting a long time, like 2-3 hours. Carson adds that every clause is almost certainly just part of the outline, but if you

read the rest of Paul's writings, you have a pretty good clue as to how Paul would have filled in the rest (Carson, "The Cross").

Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it —He is Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in shrines made by hands. Neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives everyone life and breath and all things. From one man He has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live. He did this so they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us. For in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' Being God's offspring then, we shouldn't think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image fashioned by human art and imagination.

"Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, because He has set a day when He is going to judge the world in righteousness by the Man He has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead." (17:24-31)

Paul essentially explains a Christian worldview. He puts the gospel into the bigger story of the Bible, showing the reasonableness of the faith, the exclusivity of the faith, and the necessity of repentance and faith in the Redeemer. He shares several core beliefs embedded in the Christian story.

**First, God is creator (17:24).** Paul begins his address with creation, asserting that God made the world and everything in it. This idea stood in contrast to the Stoics and the Epicureans. Regarding the former, Paul states that God is distinct from His creation; regarding the later, Paul states that God is not aloof but involved in creation.

We too are surrounded by the revelation of God. Though he doesn't cite Genesis 1, Paul affirms it. God spoke the world into existence (cf., Ps 33:6; Ps 146:6). And what a world it is!

This fact that God is the Creator of everything is why suggesting that God can be contained in shrine or a temple is absurd (17:24)? How can you reduce the Creator to a created thing? Even when Solomon's temple was dedicated, he realized God couldn't be domesticated (1 Ki 8:27; Isa 66:1-2). You can't lock up the Creator (cf., Ps 115:3).

The world is a theatre of God's revelation. As theologian Herman Bavinck stated, "In an absolute sense, therefore, nothing is atheistic (*Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol 2, 56-57). You might suppress the truth of God's existence, but you can't escape it (Ps 139:7-8). As one persecuted Christian said, after the threat of having his congregation's local church building destroyed, "You can pull down our steeples, but you can't pull down the stars." God isn't confined to a building. His glory surrounds us, like a surround sound theatre (Ps 19). Echoes of His reality permeate the world. This is why no one can claim that they have never had a witness about the revelation of God. He has made Himself known in creation (Rom 1:18-32).

It's almost laughable today at how many things say, "Made in China." You can buy a t-shirt with an American flag, and read "Made in China." Today, more and more people want to know where things are made, and where their food came from. But the reality is, everything in the world has a tag, "Made by God." The Psalmist declares, "O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures" (Ps 104:24, ESV). The Athenians, like many others, believed in many gods – a god over the sea, a god over the sun, a god over business, etc. Paul starts off saying there's One God who created everything. It was all made by the Triune God, and for the glory Triune God (Rom 11:36; Col 1:16-17).

**Second, God is the sustainer of life (17:25).** Paul says, "Neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives everyone life and breath and all things" (17:25). The God who created the world sustains the world. Paul seems to say that if Jesus weren't holding the world together, then everything would fall apart (Col 1:17). Once again, this idea stood in contrast to the Epicureans and Stoics – God is distinct from creation, and yet is intimately involved in it, sustaining it moment by moment. (cf., Isa 42:5, Gen 2:7).

God doesn't need us – we need Him (cf., Ps 50:10-12). God is entirely independent – we're dependent. God needs no air, no sleep, and no food. His self-sufficiency should humble us, reminding us that we're not God, but it should also give us hope. If we know God, through Jesus Christ, then we have everything we need (2 Pet 1:3). Tozer said, "He [God] needs no one, but when faith is present He works through anyone" (*The Knowledge of the Holy*, 36). When God called Moses he told him that "I Am" was sending him (Ex 3:14). Moses rightly saw himself as insufficient for the task; and he learned to see the I Am as totally sufficient for the task. Learn to cast your insufficiencies on His total sufficiency.

**Third, God is the ruler of the nations (17:26).** Paul goes on to say that "From one man He has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live" (17:6). He says that God's independence doesn't mean disengagement. God is intimately involved in the pinnacle of His creation, humankind. Paul asserts that God has taken a special interest in all of humanity. God has created diverse ethnic groups from one man (cf., Gen 5; 10). Diversity is God's design! He delighted in creating different ethnicities.

The reference to determining "times" and "boundaries" either refers to His sovereignty over seasons and the borders between habitable regions and wilderness (Ps 74:17), or to God's sovereignty over the rise and fall of nations and the boundaries between them (Deut 32:8). Both are true. God is sovereign over history and geography.

**Fourth, God is knowable (17:27).** In the face of Epicureans who viewed the gods as being detached and uninvolved in daily affairs, Paul says that God's purpose in creating human beings

is that “they might seek Him.” He tells the Athenians that God’s purpose is for them to discover their Creator.

Paul’s language, though, suggests the doctrine of sin, as he says, “perhaps they might reach out and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.” The image is of a blind person groping after God. Boice says that the word used here for “reach out” or “feel” (*pselaphesian*) for God is the word that the Greek poet Homer used in a well-known story of the Cyclops. A giant one-eyed Cyclops captured Odysseus and his men. But Odysseus got the Cyclops drunk and also blinded him with a sharp stake. Odysseus then wanted to get out of the cave and find his men, but it was difficult because the Cyclops was “groping around” feeling after Odysseus so that he might find the hero and kill him. It’s as if Paul is saying, in our sin we are as blind as this blinded Cyclops. We know God is there, but we need divine grace, to take give us new eyes and heart to see find Him (Boice, 299). The fact is, God is not detached, disinterested, or unengaged. He is near to us. But we need divine grace, and the work of Jesus Christ to know Him (Heb 10:22).

***Fifth, God is the Father of humanity (17:28-29).*** In verse 28, Paul quotes two pagan poets who by God’s common grace caught a glimpse of the intimate relationship between God and man. He first quotes Epimenides of Create, who wrote of the nearness and sustaining power of God: “For in Him we live and move and exist.” Then Paul quotes from a 3rd century Stoic author, Aratus, who wrote of man’s creation in the image of God: “For we are also His offspring.”

Paul quotes these poets to describe the truth about human nature. We are like our Creator in many ways. He not only sustains us, but His resemblance is seen in us, also. Have you ever said or done something that left you saying, “I just sounded like my Father.” As hard as you try, you can’t escape the fact that you bear some resemblance to your Father. In a similar way, by creation, we bear similarity to God. We aren’t God. But we can think, act, feel, choose, love, work, and most of all, know and worship Him through Jesus, who enables us to truly and fully call God, “Father” (1 Pet 1:17); indeed, “Abba Father” (Gal 4:6).

These writers caught a glimpse of the fact that we are invaded by the revelation of God (Ferguson, “Acts 17:16-34”). As Abraham Kuyper stated, “If the cosmos is a theatre of God’s revelation, in this theatre, man is both actor and spectator” (*Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology*, 265). We are an expression of God’s creation. We are made in God’s likeness. We are made to know God and worship God. So God’s revelation isn’t only echoing outside of me; it’s echoing inside of me.

Paul adds in verse 29, that since we’re made in God’s image, then it would be utter folly to worship something made by human hands (cf., Ps 115:4-8; Isa 44:9-20). While the Epicureans and Stoics realized this, they failed to see that their own mental conceptions of God were also the product of human invention (Johnson, 221).

Before moving on, let me make a few applications from Paul's evangelistic approach thus far. We have already noted Paul's adaptability for different audiences. Regarding the biblically illiterate, let's drill down a bit deeper. Notice first, his *comprehensive presentation*. Look at how Paul starts back in creation to tell the storyline of the Bible. We need to learn how to do this as well. Many people today know virtually nothing of the Bible. Just watch the game shows when Bible questions appear. Intelligent people can't answer the most basic questions. Millions of people don't know John 3:16. If anything, they know Matt 7:1, which has become the culture's most popular verse (though they never bother to quote the rest of the passage!). Paul recognizes the biblically illiteracy of the Athenians. He's not in the synagogue. To start off quoting John 3:16 to the Athenians would sound like mumbo jumbo, so he wisely starts at the beginning of the Bible and moves forward.

We too must learn to set the gospel in the whole biblical storyline. We have to do "pre-evangelism" before getting to Easter with many people today. You can't talk about Jesus without having a basic framework in which Jesus makes sense.

D.A. Carson tells of a friend who served 12 years in India, as a missionary. His main task was to teach in a seminary, but he was a very energetic evangelist, also. So the missionary learned Hindi fluently, and spent hours in villages preaching – in the midst of great religious diversity and syncretism. The missionary took pains to emphasize the exclusiveness of Christ. Over the years, he saw many profession of faith, but he didn't plant a single church because while people said "yes" to Jesus, they basically absorbed Him into the greater pantheism that underlies Hinduism. In other words, they didn't fully understand Christianity. After twelve years, the missionary came home very discouraged. So when he went back a second time, he made some changes. This time all of his evangelistic activity was restricted to only two villages. And he began with Genesis 1:1. He began with the doctrine of God, who human beings are, God's relationship to creation, and then to the Bible's storyline, and eventually to the cross and resurrection and consummation. And then he focused on establishing congregations. At the end of four years, he saw few converts, but he had planted two churches. (Carson, "Lessons")

That's a different way to look at evangelism than the way people have looked at it in the past. In the past, we assumed a certain set of ideas. We assumed people basically shared our worldview. We assumed had an understanding of God. We assumed they had heard of Jesus. We assumed they knew he died on the cross, and rose from the dead. We assumed they viewed sin as something that is offensive to God and destructive to people. We assumed people believed that history was moving somewhere. Even Atheists were "Christian Atheists," that is, they were denying the Christian God. But now, in much of the western world, like other parts of the world, we can't make these assumptions! We have to start further back with creation. We have to describe the nature of God, and move through the biblical storyline.

Further, Paul's address shows us we must remember that those who are spiritually ignorant don't simply have a "blank hard drive" (Carson, "Lessons"). They already have a worldview. It has to be destroyed and replaced with new categories and meaning, a new Christian worldview.

Next, we should also consider Paul's *cultural relevance*. How should we apply Paul's use of pagan philosophers? John Stott puts it well:

His [Paul's] precedent gives us warrant to do the same, and indicates that glimmerings of truth, insights from general revelation, may be found in non-Christian authors. At the same time we need to exercise caution, for in stating that 'we are his offspring', Aratus was referring to Zeus, and Zeus is emphatically not identical with the living and true God (286. Other Greek writers also quote a similar phrase).

I can't remember who said it (Ravi Zacharias?) – but today's theologian/poets are found in pop music. In many ways, they're the theologians and philosophers of culture. One could add that popular TV shows and movies are also responsible for teaching worldview to the masses. One philosophy professor says that if you wanted to change worldviews of the masses, take over Hollywood. While we certainly don't need to be experts on pop music and film, we do need to be aware of popular worldviews.

I find myself regularly quoting both, songs and shows, and it receives a mixed response. One audience enjoys it and learns from it; the other thinks it's dangerous or silly to quote from pagans (I had a guest never return once because I quoted the Fresh Prince of Bell Air). Stott's word is instructive, in my opinion. Use cultural sources – but do so with caution and discretion. Paul was aware of popular writings, but you don't get the idea that Paul would have been watching hours of Netflix either. Nor would he have put his mind in the gutter watching particular films. Guard your mind (Phil 4:8) yet seek to understand culture. Then build a bridge to the gospel.

***Sixth, God is both the Judge and Rescuer (17:30-31)***. Paul tells the Athenians that despite the revelation of God in creation, they have become spiritually ignorant. He has already alluded to spiritual ignorance in the opening of his address (17:23), and now returns to it. But Paul tells that that ignorance doesn't mean they have an excuse before God. Instead, he warns them of judgment: "having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, because He has set a day when He is going to judge the world in righteousness by the Man He has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead" (17:30-31). "Overlooking" doesn't mean that God ignored human rebellion. It means that in God's great mercy, He didn't visit humanity with the judgment that they deserved (Stott, 287). But now a decisive turning point as taking place in redemptive history with the coming of Jesus, and now everyone must repent or face God's just judgment.

The fact that God will judge has been clearly expressed through the resurrection of Jesus. Paul tells the Athenians that God has committed this judgment to His Son, Jesus, who will judge

everyone on a fixed day, in perfect righteousness, but if people will *repent*, this judge can save them. Salvation comes through this *Man*, the Second Adam, who lived the life we couldn't live, and died the death that we deserved, and rose on our behalf. We come from one man, Adam (17:26), but we must turn to this Man: Jesus, the Lord, Judge, and Savior.

So the appeal is clear and consistent in Scripture: repent (cf., Matt 4:17; Isa 45:22). Everyone is under the wrath of God because they have rebelled against God, but if they will turn from their sins and turn to Christ, He will "blot out their sins" (Acts 3:19) and give them life. Paul moves from the realm of philosophical debate to personal responsibility (Johnson, 222). Everyone must repent or perish.

Several ideas were outrageous at this point: (1) the exclusivity of salvation in Jesus (which flew in the face of pluralists); (2) the fact that Jesus rose bodily (which flew in the face of many Greek philosophies who believed matter was principally bad); and (3) the fact that history is going somewhere (which flew in the face of many like the Stoics). These truths still offend people today. Because it was so offensive, Paul's speech is halted.

Some have stated that Paul failed to mention the cross to the Athenians, and therefore, he failed. Some go further and say that Paul changed his tactics when he went to Corinth after this failure, resolving to know nothing but "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). But we shouldn't make that leap. We must remember a few things, like the fact that we only have the outline of Paul's speech. I doubt Paul would ever talk about the resurrection apart from the cross! Further, we know from verse 18 that Paul was preaching "Jesus and the resurrection." Are we to imagine Paul talking about Jesus and the resurrection apart from the cross? The idea is absurd to me. What is even more, when Paul said, that God overlooked times of ignorance, but has *now* commanded everyone to repent, he seems to be pinpointing the hinge point in redemptive history, namely the events surrounding Good Friday and Easter. These are a few reasons to assert that Paul didn't fail to mention the cross.

***What were the results?*** In verses 32-34, we see the results of Paul's preaching at the Areopagus:

When they heard about resurrection of the dead, some began to ridicule him. But others said, "We'd like to hear from you again about this." Then Paul left their presence. However, some men joined him and believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them. (Acts 17:32-34)

Some have also viewed Paul has a failure at Athens because of the response of the people. But I think Paul had a good day! Ultimately, we shouldn't evaluate Paul based on results, but by his faithfulness to preach the gospel. His faithfulness goes without saying. What a bold witness in Athens! With that said, we actually see the typical mixed responses. Some mocked. Some wanted to hear more. But some others believed, including Dionysius, a member of the council, and a lady named Damaris.

Paul encountered religious pluralism, great diversity of worldviews, and intelligent yet biblical illiterate people. And so will we. From this great passage, we learn how what we should



see, how we should feel, where we should go, and what we should say. May God grant us grace, as we make the truth of the gospel, the glory of the crucified and risen Christ, known to the world. This message may turn out to be a “stumbling block to Jews” and “folly to the Gentiles” but to others it will turn out to be the power of God unto salvation (cf., 1 Cor 1:18, 23; Rom 1:16).

#### Reflect and Discuss

1. What does it mean to have “evangelistic versatility?” Why is it important?
2. What does it mean to have a “Christian worldview?” What does Paul teach us about this concept?
3. What are some of the idols in your city, neighborhood, and/or nation?
4. Explain what Paul felt when he saw the idolatry in Athens. Why is this important?
5. What should we learn about Paul’s evangelism in the marketplace? Where are the “third places” in your town?
6. What strikes you most about Paul’s speech at the Areopagus?
7. Explain why Paul started with creation before moving to the resurrection and judgment.
8. In what context might we need to establish the basic framework of the Bible before talking about repentance and faith in Jesus?
9. Do you think Paul was successful in Athens? Why or why not.
10. Take a few moments to pray for opportunities to imitate Paul’s evangelistic mission this week.