

## ***The Unknown Made Known***

Paul at Mars Hill

The Empowered Church Series – Part 31

Acts 17:16-34

October 7-8, 2023

### **Introduction**

- **Last Week (Jews)** – Paul was ministering to the Jewish people and tailoring his gospel message to them proving from the Old Testament that Jesus Christ of Nazareth was the [Messiah](#).
- **This week (Gentiles)** - we are going to see Paul talk to non-Jews and we'll see how he tailors his message completely differently. This group wasn't interested yet in a Messiah. They had to be convinced there was one true God first. So, he had to [back up the bus](#) to get them on board.
- **So how can we know what portion of the gospel a person needs to hear to draw them closer to Christ?** – We talked about that last week, and I highlighted that **ANY person that we will minister to has already been reached out to from God since they were in the womb.** He has been whispering their name. He has been agitating their spirit to want more. He has been allowing the collisions of life to force them to see that they are not God and never will be. So, **by the time that we have a conversation with them, they are in Midstream. Our job is to discover where they are at on their journey and then assess the good news message of Jesus Christ and determine what the next step is in their journey and invest into that.**
- **How can we discern that?** – It's the fill in the blank on your sheet: We must listen before we speak.

**We must LISTEN before we SPEAK.**

- **The Art of Listening Well**
  - The **single greatest tool** that we can possess in our toolbelt **of relationships is the ability to ask meaningful questions.**
  - The **second** greatest tool is the ability to **listen meaningfully.**
  - What these tools, which are obviously worked in conjunction with one another **demand** is at least the following **behaviors**:
    1. **Concerned love** – there are many facets and types of love on the planet but if we are going to listen well we must be concerned, **interested in the party we are talking to. We must want their best** otherwise this conversation is going to go sideways quickly.
    2. **Unselfishness** – **we must be able to carve out space where it's not all about us.** We cannot be about them if we are about us. **If we are operating from our dysfunction or neediness, we are distorting what they are saying.**
    3. **Cautious agenda** – It's tempting to say that we should have no agenda if we are listening well, however that is not only unrealistic, when it comes to Christian conversations its dangerous. **We do have an agenda, it's called being life-giving.** If

- we don't we will end up affirming anti-Christian philosophy. The key is continually adjusting for our bias and trying to stay in the moment with the right attitude, which is to learn as much about them as possible and to remain life-giving in the process. Additionally, We cannot listen well if we are preparing our next question to lead the witness. Allow the conversation points to naturally steer what we say next. If we are truly what we are, children of God, and informed about our faith, and filled with the Holy Spirit, then we WILL have something meaningful to say or do, and sometimes that thing is to remain silent and just listen.
- **The Goal** – the ultimate goal in having meaningful conversations with the focus of sharing our faith is to discern where they are at in their journey with God and give them helpful insights, hopefully from either our own story or from Scripture, that will carry them forward into a deeper connection with God.

## Lesson

- **Casting a Net**
  - **Paul Strategically Evangelizes in Athens**
    - **Acts 17:16-17** – *“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. <sup>17</sup> 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.”*
      - **While Paul was waiting** – He's never off from ministry. But we do need to remember that he WAS on a mission trip specifically. I think he was always available to the Lord in regular life, but this particular journey was all about sharing the Lord. Normal LIFE is an opportunity to minister for Paul. He doesn't need conditions to be right, he makes it up as he goes along.
      - **Waiting for them (alone)** – Who's them? Paul left Silas and Timothy in Berea to finish up some ministry stuff and although it's difficult to tell here, it seems that Luke is not writing from a first person perspective at this moment so he may have stayed behind too. I may have missed it but the 'we/us' talk doesn't come back until Chapter 20 when Paul comes back through Macedonia. Luke & Paul may have parted ways for a considerable amount of time but when they came back together Luke inquired of all that he missed and Paul recounted it.
      - **Athens<sup>1</sup>** – Athens, Greece has one of the most storied histories on the planet. The Greek empire rose with Alexander the Great and was world dominant politically and militarily for a while, but the true mark on the earth was Greece's philosophy, art, and culture. Long after Greece as an empire fell, Hellenism (Greek culture) lived on. In Paul's day the heyday might of Greece was long gone, but everyone in the world knew that if you were going to talk about things that

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<sup>1</sup> “Although Athens had long since lost the political eminence which was hers in an earlier day, she continued to represent the highest level of culture attained in classical antiquity. The sculpture, literature, and oratory of Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. have, indeed, never been surpassed. In philosophy, too, she occupied the leading place, being the native city of Socrates and Plato, and the adopted home of Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno. In all these fields Athens retained unchallenged prestige, and her political glory as the cradle of democracy was not completely dimmed. In consideration of her splendid past, the Romans gave Athens the right to maintain her own institutions as a free and allied city within the Roman Empire.” NICNT

matter deeply in this world or even beyond it, Athens was the center of the planet. Paul may or may not have had such a lofty view as we do, but looking back it was a prime location for the gospel to be introduced early on. Just like fashion today may come from a root of Milan, London, Paris, or New York, so too did ideas and philosophies come from Athens. What happens there affects the rest of the world.

- **His spirit was provoked within him<sup>2</sup>** – is this a part of him or the Holy Spirit? We could get really spiritual and assume that by this time Paul and the Holy Spirit were so tight and interwoven that it doesn't matter, but that may be assuming too much. Nevertheless I do think that it was a combination. Luke seems to highlight that it was Paul's spirit (lower case spirit, meaning the deepest part, the spiritual part of Paul instead of the Holy Spirit within him), instead of the Holy Spirit but that doesn't mean that the Holy Spirit didn't prick Paul's spirit when he saw what he saw. But it think that it's most fair to assume that Paul was ferocious for God both in spirit and personality. I think that his personality was agitated since he took God so personally. It offended HIM that the devil was getting so much glory here.
  - **It bothered Paul's spirit, does it bother us?** Do we grieve for what is broken in our world? – I didn't say do we wring our hands and complain because it makes our life more difficult. Do we get bothered for God's glory? Every decision that human beings make results in more or less glory going to God. We are glory-affecters. We are either taking glory for ourselves or giving it to God or Satan. Someone is getting glory from every win and every loss. The only one worthy is God, so if it's not going His way then not only is that offensive, but it's going to hurt someone in the long run. **We ought to be offended for God because of all the loving things that He's done and He needs to get the credit for it.**
  - **Paul was moved to loving action** – **instead of being sad or mad and just sitting there grumbling**, Paul was moved to do something about it in a loving fashion. He didn't grab a sign and march around the marketplace talking about how terrible everyone was. He didn't parade about degrading the Athenians. He didn't boycott the Parthenon or storm the Areopagus. He looked for a way to meaningfully influence with Christ.
  - **He saw the city was full of idols** – what was he looking at? What are idols? What types of idols were popular or present? - Athens was famous for not just philosophy but for religion. Because ideas were paramount, religion had a high place. **The goal was to know the most about the most important things.** This allowed false gods and goddesses of all sorts, both of Greek, Roman, and other nations. That meant there would be **representations all over the place of the various fake deities.** Sometimes it would be a picture, sometimes a statue, sometimes a full temple dedicated to a false god. All of those are idols. **An idol is**

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<sup>2</sup> "the feeling that was uppermost in his mind as he walked here and there through the violet-crowned city was one of indignation: the city was full of idols, dedicated to the worship of gods that were no gods—for "what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God" (1 Cor. 10:20)." NICNT

a representation designed to enact worship. A quote attributed to Martin Luther says, “Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your god, your functional savior.” (that doesn’t sound like Martin Luther but we’ll do with it. It’s a good quote).

- **What are modern-day idols?** – what representations are in our culture of things that we value most and practically worship? Interestingly America is rapidly becoming more and more godless, or humanistic. As much as we are a combination of many cultures, individual gods or idols don’t take center stage here. The most dominant gods of our culture derive from the greatest false deity: SELF. Anything that serves self and independence will be represented with honor in our culture. So for example notice that we highlight:
  - **Dollar signs, expensive flashy jewelry, beautiful homes** – these are indicators of money which gives us power to do what we want. (accumulation of stuff is a deeper root – what we wear and where we live are champions of this ideal).
  - **Alcohol & Sex** – in all of our media and conversations, alcohol & sex are seen as ways to enjoy life and do what you want to do. They’re signs of personal freedom and indulgence.
  - **Escapism Elements** – for most of us it’s our phones or our TV’s. Many of us have taken it further and we have compulsions or addictions like shopping, pornography, hobbies-out-of-control, movies. It’s not that we can’t enjoy fun things, it’s the space they take up in our minds and hearts. It’s the way that they supplant God in our comfort.
- **So... - he had a response instead of a complaint.**
- **He reasoned<sup>3</sup>** – what does it mean to reason with someone? I love this word because it means ‘intelligent discourse.’ It’s something that we significantly lack in today’s culture. It means that **we calmly present ideas and the foundations for those ideas to one another and debate the value of those ideas with the heart to arrive at the best Truth.** Today there is so much defense and vitriol since everyone feels attacked. We can’t talk at a level that allows nuance anymore and that has dumbed down our society. Everyone feels attacked because in a sense they are. The loudest most radical voices have been given airways and open ears instead of being silenced by the intelligent. Entertainment has conquered Truth and the result is that it’s a mob/gang mentality who have no interest in accuracy only in winning.

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<sup>3</sup> “1256. **διαλέγομαι dialégomai**; fut. *dialéxomai*, aor. pass. *dieléchthēn* with mid. meaning, mid. deponent from *diá* (1223), denoting transition or separation, and *légō* (3004), to speak. To speak back and forth or alternately, to converse with, reason, present intelligent discourse. (I) Of an argument meaning to dispute, discuss. Used intrans. followed by the dat. as in Jude 1:9 with the prep. *prós* (4314), toward or with, and the acc. *allēlous* (240), each other (Mark 9:34 [see Mark 9:33]; Sept: Is. 1:18; Judg. 8:1). (II) To teach publicly, discourse, present intelligent arguments, akin to *lógos* (3056), intelligence, word, to discuss or argue, used intrans. and in an absolute sense (Acts 18:4; 19:8, 9; 20:9; 24:25); followed by a dat. (Acts 17:2, 17; 18:19; 20:7); followed by *prós* (4314), toward, with the acc. (Acts 24:12; Sept.: Ex. 6:27; Is. 63:1). Figuratively of an exhortation meaning to address, to speak to, followed by a dat. (Heb. 12:5).” Complete Word Study Dictionary of the NT

- **In the synagogue** – with the Jews. This was Paul’s main way of getting started in any city. He was a trained Jew who could talk intelligently with the Jews. He used to see things exactly like they did and could lead them well.
- **And the devout persons**<sup>4</sup> – like God-fearers who weren’t fully Jewish converts but worshiped Yahweh. Or this could simply be hardcore spiritual people.
- **In the marketplace**<sup>5</sup> – this is **where the public gathered. It was the intersection of society.** Their culture was just as busy as ours, but they had different priorities and difference social structures to interact. Paul engaged with them on their turf. This is **a critical part of evangelism** (sharing our faith) today.
  - **What’s our modern day marketplace in our region?** – I don’t know of any PHYSICAL places where people gather to discuss ideas. We gather, but it’s for other reasons (bars, clubs, coffee shops, etc.). So, where are ideas presented today? **ONLINE.** That is our modern day marketplace.
- **Every day – this is commitment.** Every day was trying to allow all the opportunities for God to make divine appointments. Paul couldn’t open their hearts so he kept presenting the Truth and the good news in hopes that some hearts would be opened by the Lord to receive it. He was the seed sower.
  - **A Motivation for Love** – If it was simply a motivation of Truth, he would have presented it once and wrote them off. He didn’t. That means that he had another motivation which was to impact people. Some of us keep speaking out truth out of a motivation to win. Some of us are motivated by allegiance to our group and getting affirmation or reward from our group. But some of us are motivated by actual concern for those we are talking to. That love motivation will keep us in the game when it no longer works for us. Paul was motivated by his love for God and his love for people to be saved.
  - **With those who happened to be there** – this is the practical description for a divine appointment from God. **Paul knew that EVERYONE needed Christ, but that God would sift and sort those who had had opportunity with to be the people that God was doing something special with** (e.g. opening their heart).
  - **The Power of Proximity** – Proximity is powerful. Proximity means being in someone’s actual space. Almost always it means to physically be near someone. With all of the online connections that we have, it is not true proximity. We may have many of the elements of proximity, but we don’t have the accidental and mysterious elements of what proximity can do. There is something that presence brings that online cannot. Paul knew

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<sup>4</sup> “He visited the synagogue in Athens, therefore, and held discourse there with Jews and God-fearing Gentiles,...” NICNT

<sup>5</sup> “the Agora, the center of Athenian life and activity...” NICNT

that being in other people's spaces mattered and so he committed to it. We need to do the same.

- **Open Doors**

- **Discovering Interest**

- **Acts 17:18-21** – *“Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbling [seed picker] wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. <sup>19</sup> And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup> For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” <sup>21</sup> Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.”<sup>6</sup>”*

- **What's an Epicurean philosopher?**<sup>7</sup> – Epicurean philosophy was founded by Epicurus<sup>8</sup> (341-270BC) and was based on the concept that the chief end of life was true pleasure. It was not hedonism (doing what you want), but a chase after what was truly tranquil and peaceful so that you were free from pain, no longer driven by passions, or fear. Although it was accepting of pantheism, the gods didn't interact with mankind.
- **What's a Stoic philosopher?**<sup>9</sup> – The stoics were a highly influential philosophy group originally founded by Zeno<sup>10</sup> (Zeno of Elea - 495-430 BC). The term stoic comes from the location where Zeno used to teach, in the stoa (colonnade – pillar lined roofed outdoor location in the agora/marketplace). Oddly enough not much is known about Zeno for sure. Most of what we know about this mysterious character and founder was related by his disciples: Plato and Socrates. The Stoic philosophy (expanded significantly by the more famous followers of Zeno) was centered around humanism and that mankind is capable of great things, individual self-sufficiency and that any connection to the god-force of the universe (sustaining non-personal force) should lead to the highest of what mankind could and should be. There was an afterlife, but it was undefined, shadowy and ethereal. Most advancement in life would be completed by strict self-discipline. If you cannot be that highest version of yourself you are failing. The greatest thing we got as humanity from this

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<sup>6</sup> “The Athenians themselves admitted that their passion for anything new could be carried to excess; the orator Demosthenes, for example, four centuries earlier, had reproached them for going about asking what was the latest news in a day when Philip of Macedon's aggressive policy called for deeds, not words.” NICNT

<sup>7</sup> The Epicurean school, founded by Epicurus (340–270 B.C.), member of a family of Athenian settlers on Samos, based its ethical theory on the atomic physics of Democritus and presented pleasure as being the chief end in life, the pleasure most worth enjoying being a life of tranquillity (*ataraxia*), free from pain, disturbing passions, and superstitious fears (including in particular the fear of death). It did not deny the existence of gods, but maintained that they took no interest in the life of men and women.” NICNT

<sup>8</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epicurus/>

<sup>9</sup> “The Stoics, who claimed the Cypriot Zeno (c. 340–265 B.C.) as their founder, were so called because they met in the *stoa poikili*, the “painted colonnade” in the Agora, where he habitually taught in Athens. Their system aimed at living consistently with nature, and in practice they laid great emphasis on the primacy of the rational faculty in humanity, and on individual self-sufficiency. In theology they were essentially pantheistic, God being regarded as the world-soul. Their belief in a *cosmopolis* or world-state, in which all truly free souls had equal citizen rights, helped to break down national and class distinctions. Stoicism at its best was marked by great moral earnestness and a high sense of duty. It commended suicide as an honorable means of escape from a life that could no longer be sustained with dignity.” NICNT

<sup>10</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/zeno-elea/>;

philosophy was the idea that all human beings are equal in their human rights and that ultimately allowed a breakdown of classes and harmful superior/inferior distinctions.

- **Stoicism vs. Epicureanism<sup>11</sup>** – this was the great debate of Paul’s day in philosophy. They provided **opposite explanations and answers to life’s challenges**. They were both attempts to make sense of reality. In their discovery process they were open to see if any new philosophers could add to the debate or help clarify things, which made them more **open to dialogue** and debate.
- **Some of them conversed with him (were willing to talk)** – some of the people were intrigued either with the conversation itself (the person and the manner in which they were speaking) or with the content that Paul was sharing. Either way they were willing to hear more and talk with him about it. This was a partially open door that Paul could walk through that God provided.
- **Some of them thought it was a waste of time (babblers)<sup>12</sup>** – a better translation of babbler is literally in Greek ‘seed picker’ which means you aren’t bringing anything new to the table in philosophy but you are grabbing up the leftovers of other more important people and trying to make yourself a big deal. You are what would be considered a ‘hack.’ This group was too educated to be impressed by his alleged newfangled thoughts and **since they were unimpressed they were hardhearted toward the message. They weren’t looking for ways to life, they were looking for new ideas. When you aren’t truly looking for salvation, the gospel is pretty boring.**
- **Some of them were partly intrigued and partly offended (preacher of foreign divinities)** – Some of the crowd were interested in the newness of what he was presenting but it seems slightly offensive since it was talking about a god that was foreign to them, which means that perhaps it was in competition to their own gods and goddesses which could be offensive. Since they weren’t sure they were willing to find out.
  - **He was preaching Jesus and the resurrection** – **when you don’t know your audience yet, you go with what you know and the heart of what matters to people (widest net cast).** That was an alive Savior.
- **They brought him to the Areopagus** – he earned a hearing and seemed trustworthy enough for the invite. Do we present ourselves that way? Would our neighbors find us safe or interesting enough to bring us to their friends? I don’t think many of us would get an invite. Either we aren’t kind enough, safe enough, or know what we are talking about, or winsome enough. The main reason is that

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<sup>11</sup> “Stoicism and Epicureanism represented alternative attempts in pre-Christian paganism to come to terms with life, especially in times of uncertainty and hardship; post-Christian paganism has never been able to devise anything appreciably better.” NICNT

<sup>12</sup> “But Stoics and Epicureans alike, much as they might differ from each other, agreed at least on this: that the new-fangled message brought by this Jew of Tarsus was not one that could appeal to reasonable people. They looked on him as a retailer of secondhand scraps of philosophy, “a picker-up of learning’s crumbs” (like Browning’s Karshish), a type of itinerant peddler of religion not unknown in the Agora, and they used a term of disparaging Athenian slang to describe him...Gk. σπερμολόγος, lit. “seed-picker,” “gutter-sparrow”; then someone who picked up scraps in the market, a worthless character (cf. Demosthenes’s description of Aeschines as σπερμολόγος περίτριμμα ἀγορᾶς, “a prater, a market hack,” *On the Crown* 127); then of someone who picked up scraps of learning wherever he could, which is the meaning here.” NICNT

we don't value it enough to work for it. We just hope that whatever we bring to the table is fine. I don't think it is, especially in a hostile environment.

- **What's the Areopagus?**<sup>13</sup> – The Areopagus is a fascinating concept. Literally it was a location in the marketplace (royal colonnade in the NW corner) where **a court of philosophy, religious, and morality experts held sessions**. Areopagus means 'hill of Ares' referring to the god of war in mythology. They were the more mature and serious about learning group and held powerful influence over the city. The Areopagus is known today by a far more familiar name, 'Mars Hill'. Mars is the **Roman name** for the god Ares.
- **They wanted to hear this 'new teaching' (it's strange and we want to know it)** – **Paul was actually doing something that they had a high value for in a high value way** (orators were the rockstars of Hellenistic (Greek/Roman) culture. Rhetoric was a big deal. Debate was popular.
  - **Athenians and foreign citizens only spent their time learning new things** - [complete]
  - **The Power of Curiosity** – the Greeks were interested and searching (it was strange). They didn't just say no, they were willing to listen. This led to an opening to find more of the Truth. **Too often we think we know 'enough' and we stop learning**. But the greatest minds continue to lead with curiosity.
- **The Kairos Moment**
  - **Finding a Connection Point**
    - **Acts 17:22-23** – *“So Paul, standing in the midst<sup>14</sup> of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’<sup>15</sup> What therefore you worship as unknown, this<sup>16</sup> I proclaim to you.”*
    - **Paul's Message<sup>17</sup>** - there is tremendous debate in scholarly circles around whether or not Paul really taught this message or if it was added in by someone

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<sup>13</sup> “But there was in Athens a venerable institution, the Court of the Areopagus, which exercised jurisdiction in matters of religion and morals. This aristocratic body, of venerable antiquity, received its name from the Areopagus, the “hill of Ares” (the Greek god of war), southwest of the Acropolis, on which it traditionally met. At the time with which we are dealing it held its ordinary meetings in the Royal Colonnade (*stoa basileios*), in the northwest corner of the Agora. (It continued to meet on the Areopagus to judge cases of homicide.) Its traditional power was curtailed with the growth of Athenian democracy in the fifth century B.C., but in Roman times its authority was enhanced and it commanded great respect.<sup>37</sup> Before this body, then, Paul was brought, not to stand trial in a forensic sense, nor yet to be examined with a view to being licensed as a public lecturer, but simply to have an opportunity of expounding his teaching before experts.” NICNT

<sup>14</sup> “Gk. ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ Ἀρείου πάγου. The phrase “in the midst” shows that it is the court, not the hill, that is meant here by “the Areopagus” (cf. ἐκ μέσου αὐτῶν, v. 33; ἐν τῷ μέσῳ, 4:7). That the full expression “the court (council) of the Areopagus” was shortened in common parlance to “the Areopagus” is attested by Cicero (*Letters to Atticus* 1.14.5), Seneca (*On Tranquillity* 5), Valerius Maximus (*Memorable Deeds and Words* 2.64), and by an inscription at Epidaurus (*IG* 4.937.2.” NICNT

<sup>15</sup> “Jerome indeed says that the altar seen by Paul bore the inscription “To the gods of Asia, Europe and Africa, to unknown and foreign gods” (presumably he knew of such an altar-inscription in Athens, which he translates into Latin). But Paul may have seen an altar dedicated exactly as he says.” NICNT

<sup>16</sup> “He used neuter, not masculine, forms: “what therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (RSV).”

<sup>17</sup> “Probably no ten verses in Acts have formed the text for such an abundance of commentary as has gathered around Paul's Areopagus speech. Diametrically opposing views have been expressed on the question whether Paul did deliver, or indeed could have delivered, such a speech.” NICNT

else later on. My view and the one we are moving forward with is that it doesn't matter and that the Holy Spirit wanted it in the Scripture and a part of our study, so we are studying it as if it's the voice of God through a man. Whether that man is Paul or not is not the highest concern, although it does matter for contextual criticism.

- **I perceive that in every way you are very religious**<sup>18</sup> - there is some evidence that one of the rules of speaking in front of this 'court' was that you couldn't lead with flattery (this was allegedly about truth not winsomeness or manipulation). The word here for *religious* has a slight air of suspicion to it. But it's still a kind word. Paul is not insulting them. He's saying, 'you have a foundation of wanting to know the Truth and more specifically whether or not there is a divine being and source of that Truth. That's good and right for you to do so.'
- **I observed the objects of your worship** – Paul would have a hard time debating well without having a working knowledge of what they already believed. He observed the objects of their worship. In other words he looked closely at where they were at and what made them tick. He analyzed what they were looking for and what mattered to them. For us to have any impact on our society around us we must continually discern these things or else we are speaking over their heads or in a totally irrelevant way.
- **An altar with the inscription: to the unknown god** – Paul found a great connection point and foundation for what he needed to talk about. He saw a literal altar that was both a catch-all idol (just in case they had left any out they didn't want to offend them), and an open door that there was something else out there that was higher. This was an **opportunity for Paul to talk about the MORE.**
- **What you worship as unknown, I will explain** – He walked through that open door he found and said, 'please listen, I think that I know what you are truly looking for.' That was a kind way to start a conversation about a new idea and challenging idea. He didn't turn them off right away.
  - **Cultural Engagement and Understanding** – know your audience. Paul knew *and understood* the spiritual climate he was in, so he was able to speak the language of the people.
- **Let Us Reason Together**
  - **Providing the Necessary Information**
    - **Acts 17:24-27a** – *“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, <sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. <sup>26</sup> And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and*

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<sup>18</sup> “He starts by mentioning that what he has seen in their city has impressed him with the Athenians’ extraordinary religiosity (an impression made on many other people in antiquity, some of whom considered the Athenians to be the most religious of all human beings).” NICNT

*the boundaries of their dwelling place,<sup>27</sup> that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way<sup>19</sup> toward him and find him.”*

- **Surprisingly Common Knowledge** - Interestingly **Paul begins with a lot of information that could be backed up and read in prior Greek & ancient philosophers**. He does not begin with something entirely new. He is building off what they know and filling it in with what they do not yet know.
- **The Creator God (made the universe)** – As much as the Greeks and Romans had a plethora of gods and goddesses who did and made everything, **the premise that things were MADE was common**. This allowed a conversation to be **whether or not there was ONE GREAT creator of our universe**. So far, there is no attack on their other gods because Paul is simply opening the page on possibility.
- **The Lord (Master) of heaven & earth** – **The tone shifts here from Creator to Master or Authority**. For the Romans and Greeks who believed in various gods, the majority of the existence of those deities was doing their own thing and not trying to run Earth. They were more interested in what they were doing and if it affected earth, that’s fine and that’s their prerogative. But earth was not their main concern. So, Paul shifts the conversation and says, ‘but **what if** the Creator did stay around and make this HIS earth?’ What if there was ONE who ran both the heavens (out there) and earth (down here)? What if He had things to say to mankind and we were responsible to respond?
- **Cannot be contained by mankind** – Now Paul **shifts to philosophy**. He begins to explain that conceptually if there is an Almighty Creator and Authority God, then **He is certainly unable to be contained** in His creation. That means that He is above it all. He is too big for us to grab hold of. This is a foundational tool for his next point about how we worship.
- **He doesn’t need anything that we can bring to the table (served by human hands). He gives us everything** – **This Sovereign God isn’t lacking**. He has all that He needs. He is not a wimpy, weak god that relies on mankind to complete him. He is the source of all good things, and we can’t bring anything that He needs to the table. **This allows Him to be supreme and unable to be manipulated**.
- **He made mankind from one starting source man<sup>20</sup>** – as far as what He has made here on earth, look at his handiwork. He made all human beings from one Source. That means that we are all interconnected.
- **He designed our world to live in (times, seasons, boundaries to live)<sup>21</sup>** – He was brilliant enough to give us a foundation on which to live and a system in which to

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<sup>19</sup> “The verb ψηλαφάω conveys the idea of “groping” after God in the darkness or semi-darkness, when the light of his full revelation is not available.” NICNT

<sup>20</sup> “The Athenians might pride themselves on being autochthonous—sprung from the soil of their native Attica—but this pride was ill-founded... This belief reflects the historic fact that the Athenians were the only Greeks on the European mainland who had no tradition of their ancestors’ coming into Greece: they belonged to the earliest (Ionic) movement of Greek immigration.” NICNT

<sup>21</sup> According to the Genesis account, the earth was formed and furnished to be a home for humanity before humanity itself was brought into being to occupy it; the tenses of the Greek verbs here similarly suggest that “the determination of man’s home *preceded* his creation, in the Divine plan.” And part of the forming and furnishing of this home consisted in the regulation of the “allotted seasons,” by which, after the analogy of the Lystran speech (14:17), we are probably to understand the seasons of the year by whose sequence annual provision is made for the supply of food. (Another, but less likely, interpretation sees in the “allotted seasons” the divinely determined periods for the rise and fall of empires, as in the visions of the book of Daniel.)” NICNT

live that was life-giving and wonderful. So he is a brilliant God who knows all things (omniscient).

- **There's a message for us in creation** – As brilliant as God is, He didn't just make things and disappear. **His handiwork carries His unique signature.** Everything in creation around us should constantly remind us of His presence. **It wouldn't be here if He wasn't here.**
  - **That mankind should seek God** – The constant reminders were not accidental or simply necessary, they were purposeful. They were **calling cards** to draw creation to its creator.
  - **That mankind would find God if they 'feel' their way to Him** – The point was that **even the most dense of humankind could discover God** just by living a normal life and paying attention. They may be confused as to why things happen the way they happen and they may question the nature of the divine being, but they cannot ignore His presence and reality.
    - **The Failure of Mankind to See God** - Ro 1:19–23 – *“For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup>For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. <sup>21</sup>For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup>Claiming to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup>and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.”*
- **Ever-Closer**
  - **Tailoring the Message More Deeply with the Culture**
    - **Acts 17:27b-29** – *“Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, <sup>28</sup>for “In him we live and move and have our being’;<sup>22</sup> as even some of your own poets [like Epimenides & Arastus] have said, “ ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’<sup>23</sup> <sup>29</sup>Being then God’s offspring,*

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<sup>22</sup> “One of these appears to have been the fourth line of a quatrain preserved from a poem attributed to Epimenides the Cretan (c. 600 B.C.), but actually of later date: “They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one—The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies!—But thou art not dead; thou livest and abidest for ever, For in thee we live and move and have our being.” ... The quatrain is quoted in a Syriac version by the ninth-century commentator Isho’dad (ed. M. D. Gibson, *Horae Semiticae* X [Cambridge, 1913], p. 40). Isho’dad was probably dependent here on Theodore of Mopsuestia (350–428); he reproduces Theodore’s use of Diogenes Laertius’s story (see p. 336, 62) to illustrate the inscription “To the unknown God.” The Cretans’ claim to be able to point out the tomb of Zeus was felt to be an impious falsehood. The second line of the quatrain is quoted in Tit. 1:12; according to Clement of Alexandria (*Miscellanies* 1.14.59.1–2) it comes from a work by Epimenides. A similar sentiment appears in Callimachus’s *Hymn to Zeus* (lines 7–8): “Cretans are always liars: for the Cretans, O King, actually fashioned a tomb for thee. But thou hast not died; thou art for ever.” The line here quoted by Paul can with little difficulty be given hexameter form; Cod. D spoils the rhythm by adding “day by day” at the end of it.” NICNT

<sup>23</sup> “The other is part of the fifth line of the *Phainomena* of Paul’s fellow-Cilician Aratus (born 310 B.C.), which opens with the words: “Let us begin with Zeus. Never, O men, let us leave him unmentioned. All the ways are full of Zeus, and all the market-places of human beings. The sea is full of him; so are the harbors. In every way we have all to do with Zeus, for we are truly his offspring.” In both these poems Zeus is considered not as the ruler of the traditional pantheon of Greek mythology but as the supreme being of Greek, and especially Stoic, philosophy. But did Paul intend to identify the Zeus of Greek philosophy *simpliciter* with the God of biblical revelation, whom in his letters he repeatedly calls “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”? Quite certainly not. Is he then simply detaching from their original contexts sentiments which, so far as their actual phraseology goes, lend themselves to incorporation into his Judaeo-Christian context? Again, no. Even in their contexts, the words quoted (especially those of Aratus) could be taken as pointing to some recognition of the true nature of God—that recognition which, according to the

*we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone,<sup>24</sup> an image formed by the art and imagination of man.”*

- **He’s near us (not far)** – Paul then shifts to the matter of proximity and personalness of God. He highlights that the God he is talking about is not a distant God, either in physical or relational space. He is near us. He is not far away. **He is present.**
- **He is our reality that we live IN (“in him we live and move and have our being” quote)** – the first quote here is likely from Epimenides (c. 600BC). The point that Paul is making is that since God is the creator and sustainer then he is the fabric of reality in which we live, and which holds us together. **He is reality.** Anything that is created is from Him therefore His is in all things.
- **“We are His offspring” quote & meaning** – The second quote here seems to be from Aratus (310BC). The simple point here is that if we are His creation then we have a relational connection to Him as His creation. **We are naturally tied to Him in the deepest way.**
- **The Danger of Relativizing and Contextualizing the Gospel** – as I have said, we must tailor the portion of the Gospel that is needed for every individual as we share the love of Christ. I have always stated firmly that we must speak in words that they (unbeliever) can understand. However once we get into the idea of using things from one culture and accommodating them to Christianity we have to slow down and talk about nuance. The commentator F.F. Bruce who wrote the NICNT portion of Acts, talks about these quotes and clarifies that although they are likely both poems about Zeus, Paul is not saying that Zeus is the one one Yahweh. What he IS saying is that just as mankind has tried to make sense of their reality by attributing things to Zeus, even deity and an Almighty nature, that deity and nature IS found in Yahweh, the real god and not the false god Zeus. Do you see the difference? It’s one thing to grab a name or grab a concept and accommodate it into Christianity, such as Paul did with the Greek word-concept logos. It’s another thing to say that Allah and Yahweh are the same person. It’s fine to say that GOD is Yahweh, when a culture calls their deity GOD as a correction, but where we drift from orthodoxy is when we start saying that what they believe is the same as what we believe only we know more about that person. For example, Mormonism claims that they know Jesus Christ and have a whole description about His character and nature. We don’t say that we know that same Jesus Christ but we know Him BETTER. No, the Jesus Christ of the LDS (Joseph Smith’s Book of Mormon version) is NOT the same as the Jesus Christ of the New Testament. They are two different characters with the same name. Theirs is false and the New Testament one is real. If we fall into this

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writer to the Hebrews, is his reward to “those who seek him” (Heb. 11:6); they “could be acknowledged,” says N. B. Stonehouse, “as up to a point involving an actual apprehension of revealed truth.” NICNT

<sup>24</sup> “Paul is dealing here with the responsibility of all human beings as creatures of God to give him the honor which is his due. And this honor is certainly not given if they envisage the divine nature in the form of plastic images. Even if pagan philosophers rationalize the images as material symbols of the invisible divinity, the great bulk of the worshipers will pay divine homage to the images themselves.” NICNT

error we are in a sense attributing the One True God with the false images that have been said about the other figure, and that's bad.

- **Since we are FROM Him we shouldn't limit him to items or images or believe that we can remake Him into our imagination images** – Since all of this is true then how in the world can we reduce Him into images or idols? **How can the handiwork of a limited creation truly and faithfully express the nature of a God like this?** It can't. To do so is a dishonor to God Himself. He is so much bigger than all of that. **This idol worship is demeaning.** It's not worship it's the opposite of worship. It's manipulating and downplaying.
- **Time to Transform**
  - **The Challenge to Change**
    - **Acts 17:30-31** – *“The times of ignorance God overlooked,<sup>25</sup> but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> because he has fixed a day<sup>26</sup> 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.”*
    - **We know too much now to claim ignorance** – This is not Paul saying that his generation had advanced so much in philosophy and science that they could know more about God than any previous generation. He is saying that **since Christ has come, there is a new way of God dealing with mankind.** Since God showed up physically to us and revealed so much about His nature in an undeniable fashion, new rules for worship and connection apply, than did in the past.
    - **Past ignorance was overlooked in God's kindness & justice** – **Before Christ** came there was no image of God. **It was all theoretical** and that allowed a lot of ignorance without a lot of proof. **It demanded significant faith that many could not fully reach.** Since **we are held accountable to what we should know**, they didn't have enough information to be held firmly accountable, so God overlooked a lot of it.
    - **Now we must repent for we know better** – but now...now that Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, the third Person of the Trinity, God Himself showed up...things have to change. We know better. This whole, we are our own gods, or we can manipulate gods, has got to go. It's not only insufficient philosophy it's competing rebellion and will be answered in kind.

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<sup>25</sup> “The Athenians had good reason, then, to acknowledge their ignorance of God. But, even if such ignorance was not free from blame, God in mercy had passed it over. There is a parallel here not only to the statement in the Lystran speech that in past generations God “allowed all the nations to go their own ways” (14:16), but also to Paul’s teaching in Rom. 3:25 about God’s forbearance in passing over sins committed before the coming of Christ. It is implied in all these places that the coming of Christ marks a fresh start in God’s dealings with the human race. In the present place God’s overlooking people’s earlier ignorance of himself is seen to have had in view the full revelation now given in the advent and work of Christ. “But now” in the present context is parallel to “but now” in Rom. 3:21. If ignorance of the divine nature was culpable before, it is inexcusable now.” NICNT

<sup>26</sup> “Cf. Ps. 9:8; 96 (LXX 95):13; 98 (LXX 97):9. For other Pauline references to the appointed day of judgment cf. Rom. 2:5, 16; 1 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:6, 10; 1 Thess. 5:2, 4; 2 Thess. 1:10; 2:2.” NICNT citations

- **God will come as judge discerning righteousness and sin on an appointed day<sup>27</sup>** – there is not a loose accountability, there is an **imminent accountability**. This **God** that Paul is speaking about **WILL COME** again and demand worship and allegiance. There is a **SPECIFIC DAY** marked out in the future when it will happen, and we don't know what that is. But to pretend it away is not wise.
- **By a man whom he has appointed<sup>28</sup>** – who is this and what is Paul talking about? This is a poetic reference to **Jesus Christ** as the man whom will save the world from their sins. It's an **allusion to Daniel 7:13** when 'one who looked like the son of man (human)' was endowed with that power.
- **The resurrection made that a fact (assurance by raising Him)<sup>29</sup> – we can easily know who the Savior is because He is the one that was raised from the dead by God Himself** (and not through another agent as all other resurrections have occurred).
- **Mixed Reaction**
  - **Some Accept and Some Struggle with the Message**
    - **Acts 17:32-34** – *“Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.”<sup>33</sup> So Paul went out from their midst.<sup>34</sup> But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.<sup>30</sup>”*
    - **The Resurrection was a watershed concept** – some embraced it and others rejected it. Upon that decision allows Jesus to remain the Savior He is or to be rejected. Paul later states in one of his letters that all of Christianity rises or falls on the reality of the resurrection. If Jesus didn't raise, then we don't have a savior and we can't raise from the dead, so we are all doomed. So, it's a critical part of the gospel message and can't be ignored. But it's a splitting issue.
    - **The unusual challenge of resurrection talk at the Areopagus<sup>31</sup>** - there was a strong mythology surrounding how the Areopagus was founded. It was believed that the goddess Helene quote the god Apollo in her statements commissioning the group and one line in that commissioning specifically stated there was no resurrection.
    - **Rejectors - Some mocked** – at this point some of the group bailed out. He had said too much and walked on sacred ground with the who resurrection thing and

<sup>27</sup> “Greek thought had no room for such an eschatological judgment as the biblical revelation announces. But not only is the judgment day fixed; the agent of the judgment has also been appointed.” NICNT

<sup>28</sup> “Paul does not refer directly to the human figure—the “one like a son of man”—of Dan. 7:13; but this is “the man” whom he has in mind, the one in whom God’s eternal purpose finds its fulfillment, the one to whom the Father has given “authority to execute judgment, because he is Son of Man” (John 5:27).” NICNT

<sup>29</sup> “Moreover, he assures his audience, God has furnished firm proof that this is the man through whom he is going to judge the world, because this is the man whom he has raised from the dead.” NICNT

<sup>30</sup> “Cod. D reads “one Dionysius, an Areopagite of honorable station,” and omits all reference to Damaris; this, however, may not represent the original Western text. The Graeco-Latin codex E/e attaches the description “of honorable station” to Damaris, not to Dionysius.” NICNT

<sup>31</sup> “The idea of resurrection of dead people was uncongenial to the minds of most of Paul’s Athenian hearers. All of them except the Epicureans would no doubt have agreed with him had he spoken of the immortality of the individual soul; but as for resurrection, they would have endorsed the sentiments of the god Apollo, expressed on the occasion when that very court of the Areopagus was founded by the city’s patron goddess Athene: “Once a man dies and the earth drinks up his blood, there is no resurrection.” NICNT

they were out. Not only that but they were insulted by him taking up their time and they wanted him to know about it.

- **Seekers - Some wanted to hear more** – some wanted to hear more about this. There was something in what Paul said that resonated but they had significant questions before they could embrace it.
- **Embracers - Some became believers**<sup>32</sup> – some had their hearts prepared and opened by God that day and they were in. They not only resonated with the message they knew it was true and their surrendered at that moment.
  - **Dionysius the Areopagite**<sup>33</sup> – this is a **member of the council** himself. That's a big deal. Tradition says that he became the first Christian bishop of Athens (Eusebius said that).
  - **Female Damaris**<sup>34</sup> – The highlight of an **influential woman** is in line with how Luke has been tracking this whole missionary trip. The interesting thing is that there were not female members of the Areopagus, so one of two things needed to be true. 1.) she is Dionysius' wife and was allowed to hang around just outside the ropes (it was a roped off event but open to a watching public); 2.) she was a wealthy, influential woman who was interested and was just outside the ropes on her own accord. There is no proof either way only speculation. Doesn't really matter.
  - **Others with them**<sup>35</sup> - There were more than the ones named. Usually biblical writers name people because the audience would have been familiar with them to some degree. Either they were personal or famous. Rarely, but sometimes they are mentioned to highlight that certain influential people were involved. But we need to know that it was not only 2 people who responded to this gospel message, it was more.

## Conclusion

- **Where's Your Athens?** – Where are you being called to ministry? What sphere are you specially equipped to minister to? What's your community? Where is your closest marketplace where you can have a voice? Let's walk through those doors of opportunity with the right heart and the power of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>32</sup> "The Athenians of today have made up for their ancestors' indifference by engraving the text of Paul's *Areopagitica* on a bronze tablet at the foot of the ascent to the Areopagus, and by naming a neighboring thoroughfare in honor of the apostle." NICNT

<sup>33</sup> "One of them was a member of the Areopagus court, Dionysius by name. Eusebius reports, on the authority of a later Dionysius (bishop of Corinth c. A.D. 170), that Dionysius the Areopagite became the first bishop of Athens; this is the kind of tradition which was bound to arise. He was later credited with the authorship of a body of Neoplatonic literature, actually dating from the fifth and sixth centuries." NICNT

<sup>34</sup> "As for Damaris, Ramsay suggested that she must have been "a foreign woman, perhaps one of the class of educated Hetairai," in view of the unlikelihood of an ordinary Athenian woman being present on such an occasion. A meeting held in one of the colonnades of the Agora could not be a private meeting; there was bound to be a crowd of bystanders listening to whatever they found interesting,<sup>97</sup> and Damaris was probably one of them. It is less likely that she was a God-fearing Gentile who heard Paul in the synagogue; the impression given is that she heard his *Areopagitica*. Chrysostom makes her the wife of Dionysius...*On the Priesthood* 4.7. The name Damaris is a variant of δάμαλις, "heifer" (lat<sup>h</sup> actually has the spelling *Damalis*). The original form of the Western text perhaps described her as εὐσχήμων ("of honorable estate"), like the God-fearing Greek women of Beroea (v. 12)." NICNT

<sup>35</sup> "There is no mention of any baptisms at Athens, nor is Paul said to have planted a church there. Although Athens was in the Roman province of Achaia, it is a family resident in Corinth that Paul describes as "the firstfruits of Achaia" (1 Cor. 16:15)." NICNT