

Series: **The Original Church Planter**
Today's Title: **"Our Strange, Appealing Message"**

May 21, 2023 – Acts 17:16-21

Achievement Sunday

Objective: To encourage Christians to have compassion for the lost – to challenge seekers to be sincere in their search.

Opening Prayer

The mission Jesus gave His followers – the Church – is:

Matthew 28:19-20

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

In **Acts 1:8** – right before Jesus ascends up into Heaven, Luke records a detail Jesus gave His followers in regard to how to fulfill the mission.

The mission is huge!!!

"...make disciples of all nations..."!!!

That's a tall order – "all nations" – the entire world!!

So, in **Acts 1:8**, Jesus breaks it down into bite size pieces.

"...you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

How do you eat an elephant? 1 bite at a time.

How do you "make disciples of all nations"? By making disciples in your hometown first (Jerusalem) – and then moving outward into "Judea" (the area around Jerusalem) – and then go to "Samaria" (the area around Judea) – until you eventually go to the "end of the earth".

This is exactly what we see when we read through **Acts** – and we see the outward expansion of the Church.

When I was growing up in church, I remember all sorts of talk and focus on international missions – sending people who would take the gospel to different parts of the world.

But I really don't remember any discussion or effort on “making disciples” – in the immediate community around the church.

Maybe I missed that part - maybe that church did focus and put resources into reaching that community.

But so many churches and Christians in the United States in the recent past focused solely on overseas missions and failed to take the gospel to the community where their church was located.

This is an area we here at CDO Bible have worked at over the years.

We have put our energy and our best resource – **YOU** – into different ways we can bring the gospel to NW Tucson.

- Some of these efforts are more direct gospel ministry.
- Some are designed to make a connection between the church and the unchurched – by meeting needs and practicing love.

To do this – to minister to our community – and to the larger areas beyond – we need to understand the culture we live in.

For some Christians in the American church, they still have a belief that the United States is a Christian nation – that we just have to make a few changes and we’ll see our nation return to Christian living and values.

I’m not sure this is the case.

We need to realize that we don’t live in a Christian nation – not anymore.

We don’t live in a nation whose cultural understanding is influenced by a Biblically based view of life – a Biblical worldview.

Those who believe the U.S. is still a Christian nation make the assumption that (evangelical) Christians make up a large % of the U.S. population – anywhere from 40% - 50% are Christians – maybe closet Christians.

Pastor and author *John S. Dickerson*, in his book: “The Great Evangelical Recession” analyzes the data and shares an uncomfortable fact about modern-day America.

The book was written in 2013... at that time, Evangelical Christians only made up 7% - 9% of the population.

(“The Great Evangelical Recession”, by John S. Dickerson, p. 26).

Dickerson is taking a snapshot of the nation.

Barna research narrows the focus for us.

I’ve previously shared that Barna research reveals that spiritually speaking, *Tucson* is in the same category as the Northwest U.S. – *Portland, Oregon, Seattle, Washington, San Francisco, California.*

In regard to Christianity and spiritual truth – we are no different than those cities – which are known for being very secular and very intolerant of Christians and Biblical truth.

I share this because it's important for us – as followers of Jesus – to have a clear and accurate understanding of the culture we live in – because this is the culture we are called to serve – and to love and minister to the people who live in this culture.

If we were going to serve as missionaries in a foreign land, one of the essential things to do before arriving in that land would be to learn about and understand the culture, we would be living in.

We are missionaries – but we're not going to a foreign land.
We are missionaries – called to take the gospel to our land – our homeland – our own backyard.

We need to know the culture – so we can understand why people do / don't do certain things.

We would also need to understand the culture so our gospel ministry would be more effective.

This is what the Apostle Paul did.

In fact, he wrote down his philosophy of ministry in regard to serving in various cultures of the 1st century.

He understood the simple reality that different cultures require different approaches / methods.

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

“Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, *to win as many as possible.*

To the Jews I became like a Jew, *to win the Jews.* To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), *so as to win those under the law.*

To those not having the law (Gentiles) I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), *so as to win those not having the law.*

To the weak I became weak, *to win the weak.* I have become all things to all people *so that by all possible means I might save some.*

I do all this *for the sake of the gospel,* that I may share in its blessings.”

1 message – Jesus – but different methods in different cultures as to how that timeless, never-changing message of Jesus can be shared.

Turn to Acts 17:16-21

In our passage today – and next Sunday - we’re going to see Paul take into account the culture of Athens – and he will share the gospel with the Athenians in a way that is different from what he would normally share in the Synagogues with the Jewish population.

- Today, I want us to examine our heart for those without Christ – those who are spiritually lost.
- I also want to challenge those of you who are seeking – searching for spiritual truth. Those of you who are not

yet followers of Jesus – but you’re checking Him out – you’re looking into the claims of Christ – the teaching of the church. ***Are you sincere – of just spiritually curious?***

Athens was the leading city of the ancient world in culture, politics, art, along with philosophical and intellectual advancements that laid the foundations for Western Civilizations.

Its zenith was probably from 600 – 300 B.C.

Athens was home to Socrates (470-399 B.C.), Plato (428-348 B.C.), and the adopted home of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.).

It was the center of religion in ancient Greece – more on that a bit later.

One of the primary ruling councils in Athens was the Areopagus (similar to the Jewish Sanhedrin).

In the 1st century the primary work of this council was to defend and protect the gods of Greek and Roman mythology – and to govern aspects of education in the city.

The Areopagus met on a small hill – just over 300’ high – on the northwest side of Athens.

The hill was called the ‘*Hill of Ares*’.

Ares was the Greek god of war – which in Roman mythology was referred to as *Mars* – which is why in Paul’s day – and today - this hill is called *Mars Hill*.

The Athens which Paul visits is clearly not the powerful Athens of classical antiquity, but a city humbled by the centuries. Rome had conquered it in the 3rd Century B.C., and then a Roman army looted the city in 85 B.C.

By the time of Paul, Athens was still a center of learning, but with none of its former wealth or glory (*Encyclopedia of the Bible*).

Let's begin today by reading vs. 16.

“Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.”

Your reaction to the culture. vs. 16

Paul is waiting in Athens for Timothy and Silas to arrive (“them”).

As he is waiting, he walks around the city and is struck – deeply stirred in his spirit – due to the spiritual lostness of Athens.

His “spirit” is “provoked within him” – irritated.

Paul sees the countless idols throughout the city.

Athens had a place for almost every god in the pagan pantheon.

One ancient writer – in what is certainly a hyperbolic statement, said there were 30,000 gods and goddesses in Athens. (*Acts Odyssey*, On the Trail of the Apostles, by Rene Schaeffer, p. 186)

Athens was a very religious place – but it was all false religion.

It was a city that worshipped gods that didn't exist – gods that were not gods but demonic forces.

Paul's "spirit was provoked" by this.

I wonder if our spirit is provoked by what we see in our culture.

I wonder if our spirit is irritated by the idols in our culture.

The idols of self / money / possessions / status / sex / celebrity / family / entertainment and leisure / beauty / power / control / independence or autonomy.

I wonder if our spirit breaks – hurts – over those who worship these false gods – and they don't know the 1 true God – Jesus?

When you see the culture – what is your reaction?

Anger? Rage? Confusion? Sorrow?

Compassion?

Mark 6:34

"When He (Jesus) went ashore He saw a great crowd, and He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd."

John 11:33

"When Jesus saw her (Mary) weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in His spirit and greatly troubled."

We can be angry at the reality and result of sin – a righteous anger at the pain and suffering caused by sin.

While at the same time we aren't angry at people who are lost – people who live under the control of the flesh. Jesus had compassion toward lost people – and He was angry and “greatly troubled” in His “spirit” toward the pain caused by sin.

Engage people in spiritual conversations. vs. 17

What did Paul do about the idol worship that irritated him deeply – in his spirit?

vs. 17

“So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.”

He did what he was called to do – what every follower of Christ is called to do.

He started talking with people about Jesus.

He doesn't stew in his anger or irritation at the numerous idols.

He starts to tell people about Jesus – and for Paul – that started in the synagogue – the Jewish place of worship.

Paul always started with the Jewish population – to share the news that the long-awaited Messiah had finally come – it was Jesus – and He suffered, died, and rose from the dead.

“reasoned” - Luke uses the same Greek word he used in vs. 2.

Paul started a conversation – a discussion – dialogue – questions and answers – with those in the synagogue. “...devout persons” would be Gentiles who were worshiping the God of Israel – converted to Judaism. They had rejected the polytheistic religion and practices that was so pervasive in Athens – and they were learning about and following the God of Scripture.

But Paul didn't stay in the synagogues.

He also went to the mall.

Well... to the marketplace – which is the ancient equivalent of our modern shopping malls.

Idols steal glory from God.

Idols are counterfeit gods.

When you worship an idol – you are giving credit or glory to something that doesn't deserve it!

This is what irritates or “provokes” Paul's “spirit”.

He is irritated / angry at the idols and the demonic powers behind them – not at the people who were deceived by them.

People are interested in spiritual conversations, but not all are interested in spiritual truth. vs. 18-21

Paul will meet with the Areopagus (ruling council) – on Mar's Hill – the leading philosophers of 1st century Athens.

2 Groups: Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.

Epicureans:

Followers of Epicurus (341-270 B.C.).

They were not atheists. They simply believed the gods were not relevant to life.

The gods were too far removed to be of any concern.

They believed everything in life was by chance.

No afterlife – no resurrection.

When you died that was it – the end – so, they believed pleasure was the chief end of life.

Those who follow Epicurean philosophy today live by the motto: *You only live once! / Eat, drink, and be merry!*

Life is short – enjoy all of it you can!!

Stoics:

Followed the teaching of a man named Zeno (340-265 B.C.).

They were pantheistic in their beliefs – God is in everything – everything is God.

Their view of life and the afterlife was similar to the Epicureans.

The Greek word for ‘porch’ is *stoa* – and Zeno used to teach on a porch / *stoa* – and those who went up on the porch to listen were called ‘porchers’ – or *stoics*.

These philosophies had been around for 350 years!

18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babblers wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities” -- because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

They heard Paul discussing Jesus in the marketplace – and they were not impressed – at least at first.

“babblers” – is not a positive term.

It literally means ‘*seed picker*’ – it pictures a small bird picking up seeds in the gutter - and it has the idea of a person who picks up a speck of information here, and another over there – and then passes the information to others as if they know what they’re talking about.

It was a term used by arrogant intellectuals.

“Others said...” – It seems another group of philosophers thought Paul was adding 2 more gods to their long list of gods.

The Greeks worshipped countless gods – and they never heard of this “Jesus” – and “resurrection”.

In Greek, the word ‘resurrection’ [*anastasis*] can sound very similar to the female name, Anastasia.

So, it seems some of the philosophers thought Paul was introducing 2 gods they didn’t know – Jesus and Anastasia.

When we share the gospel – when we talk of spiritual things, don’t be surprised when you’re misunderstood. Don’t be surprised when people don’t know what you’re talking about.

This was one of the reasons Paul always started his ministry in a new city in the synagogue.

The Jewish people in the synagogue had a baseline of knowledge of God and Biblical truth.

They understood basic spiritual principles that are taught throughout the O.T.

So, Paul didn't have to explain the spiritual 'A, B, C's' to them.

But with this group – the philosophical elites of Athens – they didn't understand the spiritual basics, so Paul has to approach things differently.

But notice the interest in spiritual things these pagan, polytheistic people have.

Some people are spiritually curious. vs. 19-21

The new ideas Paul was proclaiming sparked enough interest in these 2 groups of intellectuals that they invite Paul to come and speak to the entire council.

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

20 For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean."

21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

Strange things...but appealing things.

The gospel made them curious to hear more from Paul.
There is a genuine curiosity here with the philosophers.

I believe this is not unique to the philosophers in 1st century Athens.

I believe people today have a genuine curiosity about spiritual things.

Yes... many times, this curiosity is more of an entertainment pursuit than genuine spiritual seeking – but not always.

Luke tells us in **vs. 21** that those in Athens entertained themselves with these discussions.

Luke's comment in **vs. 21** was not unique to Paul's message.

Other historical writers made the same observation about the Athenians.

The point of Luke's editorial comment is to show how these intellectual elites who thought of themselves in such lofty terms often wasted their time listening to the latest philosophical fads.

They called Paul a "babbler" – a seed picker – when in reality they were the ones picking up all sorts of information and pretending they had all the knowledge – but the reality was:

"...spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new."

As I said... next Sunday will serve as part 2 – and we'll look at Paul's message on Mars Hill and how he adapted his message to the group he was speaking with.

Apply it...

Christian...

What is your reaction to the unbelieving, lost culture?
Does your heart break – do you have compassion for those who are far from Christ?

Or... do you burn with rage and cast your judgement on lost people?

What is Jesus' reaction to lost people?

We know what it was / is: Compassion – tenderness – mercy – grace – truth telling!!

- He would leave the 99 to find the 1 lost sheep.
- He would turn the house upside down to find the 1 lost coin. (Parables of Jesus in Luke 15).

Spiritual seeker...

Are you sincere in your search for spiritual truth?

When you hear the truth of Jesus – His love, grace, and mercy toward you – will you realize the search is over?
Jesus is the final answer.

He is "...the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through Me."

John 14:6

He is the only way of salvation.

He is the only spiritual truth.

He is the 1, true God – who loves you – and gave His
live for you – to redeem you from your sins.

Come to Him now.

Close in prayer