

Series: **The Original Church Planter**
Today's Title: **"Introducing the Unknown God"**

May 28, 2023 – Acts 17:22-34

Memorial Day Weekend

Objective: To encourage Christians to have courage to share the gospel and to trust God with the results.

Opening Prayer

Quick review...

As Paul is waiting for Timothy and Silas to make the 250+ mile trip from Berea to join him in Athens, he spent time walking around the city – and he saw the unbelievable number of idols throughout Athens.

Every building is also a temple to one of the gods in the Greek and Roman pantheon.

Virtually every corner has an idol erected – statues to the god it represents.

Everywhere he goes, Paul sees the religious zeal of Athens, but it's all false religion.

It's worshiping things that aren't gods – or gods that are in reality demons and forces of darkness.

As a result, Paul's "spirit was provoked" (vs. 16) – disturbed – irritated.

His response: He went to the synagogue, as was his practice, and "he reasoned" (vs. 17) with the Jews in the synagogue.

After this he then goes to the marketplace to talk with people about Jesus.

Some of the leading intellectuals – leading philosophers in Athens hear Paul’s teaching – and they invite him to come and share his “new teaching” (vs. 19) with the Areopagus, the ruling council of Athens.

In this account, we see Paul openly and naturally sharing the gospel – talking with people about Jesus.

I believe we learn a great deal from the example of Paul in this passage – to help us be bolder – and more confident to share Christ.

Turn to Acts 17:22-34 – p. 926

In our passage today, we will see Paul’s witness before the Areopagus in Athens.

We’ll have a glimpse of his strategy and see the theological truths he shared with them.

As we examine his witness we will gain some valuable insights for our own life – our own opportunities to share about Jesus with people in our life – in our culture.

The first thing we see is Paul...

Finding common ground vs. 22-23

Paul’s practice in every city was to first go to the synagogue – the Jewish place of worship.

One of the reasons was the common ground Paul had with the Jewish people in every city.

They shared the O.T. – a belief in God – a shared national history – shared customs and traditions. But Paul has been invited to speak with the members of the Areopagus – the leading philosophers and intellectual elites of this grand city. At first glance, Paul has nothing in common with these men.

Religiously... culturally... morally... ethically... food... even their clothing might have been different.

With all those differences, Paul was still able to find some common ground.

He used their idol – dedicated to “the unknown god” – as the common ground to start his teaching.

It’s actually common ground we have today with every single person in the world.

We have been created with a God-space in each of us. Later, in **Romans 1**, Paul would write that each person “knows God” (vs. 19, 21).

Ecclesiastes 3:11

“...He has put eternity into man's heart...”

So, Paul will start on the common ground he shares with them – mankind’s need/desire to worship.

Archeologists have discovered this universal truth in all sorts of places – covering various times and eras in

human history – the commonality in all these cultures and peoples is some form of worship.

Read vs. 22-23

Paul is bold here. Remember, the Areopagus is comprised of the leading intellectuals of the day.

They are the elites who hold a great deal of power over the city.

But Paul has been listening to them – he has learned what they believe – and he has observed the culture of Athens and he will use those images and practices to reveal God to them – to share the Gospel with them.

Epicureans: believed in the gods but didn't think they were relevant to life – too distant to care about humanity.

They didn't believe in anything beyond the grave.

No afterlife.

The result was they believed pleasure was the chief end of man.

Stoics: They were pantheistic in their belief - that God was in all things – all things are God.

They were similar in their disbelief in the afterlife.

They believed in fate – that everything in life happened by chance – random.

The result was each person had to determine the quality and direction of their life.

They were the master of their own fate.
In a sense, the human will was god-like.

This is who made up the majority of the Areopagus / the ruling council of Athens Paul is speaking with.

They had a specific belief system – a specific life philosophy – and it opposed the truth Paul would proclaim.

But he is very tactful when he talks with them.

He doesn't go out and bash their beliefs or rail against their pagan lifestyle.

He calmly and orderly connects the gospel with things he has observed in their life and their beliefs.

We could say, in one sense, Paul compliments their pursuit of religion.

“...I perceive that in every way you are very religious.”

That's good.

They're interested in spiritual things.

They believe in deity (deities).

But they are ignorant in their belief.

They have an altar dedicated “To the unknown god.”

Here's where we see Paul's courage and directness.

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

In essence, he says, *'What you worship and don't know anything about – I'll tell you about this God that you don't know anything about.'*

Paul begins to describe the true God – which the men of Athens were ignorant about.

He's going to tell them 6 things about God – 6 things which will challenge their Epicurean and Stoic beliefs.

Another thing to note...I think this is very important for us to understand...

Paul doesn't attack or criticize their beliefs in a confrontational manner.

He simply tells them the truth that Scripture reveals about the reality, nature, and work of God.

Paul's witness about God will contradict what they believe – but he's going to let them figure that out and wrestle with the truth he shares.

Something for us to consider and follow the Apostle's example as we share Christ.

Paul begins with God as the Creator of all things.

God, the transcendent Creator. vs. 24-25a

Read vs. 24-25

Truth #1. God created all things.

Matter is not eternal. These philosophers believed that matter was eternal. When Paul shares that God created all things, it is a rebuttal of their belief.

Psalm 24:1

“The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein...”

As Creator of all things, He is the “Lord of heaven and earth...” – which is a denial of any other gods.

Isaiah 44:6

“Thus says the LORD... “I am the first and I am the last; besides Me there is no god.”

Truth # 2. God is transcendent.

“...nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything...”

God is over all things – over the heavens and the earth.

He is independent of the creation – which would be a denial of the Stoic’s pantheistic beliefs.

Truth #3. God is the giver of life. *vs. 25b*

“...since He Himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.”

God doesn’t need anything from us – He doesn’t depend on us for His existence in any way.

We depend on Him for our existence.

He is the one who gives us life – our very breath.

All men and women are equally needy and dependent on God to sustain us.

He created us – and He sustains our life.

God is sovereign over all people and nations. vs. 26

Truth #4 that Paul shares is that God is the sovereign creator of all people – and He is King over all kings and kingdoms.

This would have been contrary to the Athenian arrogance and racist beliefs.

The people of Athens were a very proud people – and they believed they were superior to all non-Athenians.

They referred to all other people as Barbarians.

They believed their origin was from the very soil of Athens.

But Paul tells them the truth of Scripture.

26 “And He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place...”

From 1 man – and 1 woman – from Adam and Eve – come the entire human race.

We all have a common lineage – the same ancestry.

This would be another verse – another Biblical truth that shows the evil and nonsensical nature of any and all forms of racism.

There is 1 race – the human race – all of us descended from Adam – and then from Noah and his family.

There are different ethnicities – different cultures – but 1 race – the human race.

We are all in Adam.

The only way to change this is to be “in Christ” – by putting your faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior.

“...having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place...”

God is also the architect of history.

History is not random – nor is it cyclical.

History is linear.

God is the architect of nations – He is orchestrating kings and kingdoms to a specified end – a destination that He has decreed and is providentially and sovereignly controlling and guiding.

Deuteronomy 32:8

“When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when He divided mankind, He fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God.”

God uses the thoughts and actions of men and women – of kings and kingdoms - to achieve His goals.

There is nothing random in life. The events of life – the events of history – are not by chance.

God is immanent and can be found. vs. 27-29

Read vs. 27-29

Truth #5 – God is immanent.

God is both transcendent, and immanent.

He is transcendent – far above all things – separate from His creation – outside of space and time.

He is also immanent - He is near. He is not far from each one of us. You can know Him.

These are 2 of the great theological truths about God. His immanence – and His transcendence.

Psalm 145:18

“The LORD is near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth.”

To drive home this point, Paul quotes from 2 poets these men would have been familiar with.

The 1st quote is from the 6th-century B.C. Cretan poet Epimenides – ‘In him we live and move and have our being’

The 2nd quote was from the ancient Stoic poet-philosopher, Aratus who wrote – ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’

When they wrote these words these poets weren’t talking about the God of the Bible – the 1 true God – but Paul uses their familiar words and applies them to the truth about God and His immanence – that He is near and can be found.

The Epicureans believed the god's were too removed from the world to be of any concern – so they ignored the gods.

But Paul says this Creator God is near – and can be found by those who search for Him!

Hebrews 11:6

“...for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him.”

At the end of this thought Paul adds these pointed and direct words:

“...we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.”

Athens is full of images of gold, silver, and stone!
Artists had been creating idols of the Greek gods – images of these gods for centuries – and the city was full of them!!!

There were likely some of these idols right there – in the very place the Areopagus met!

This is a bold statement by Paul – but he doesn't spend time repeating it – or hounding them on this.

He simply states the truth – and then moves on to his next point – leaving the truth to sit in the minds and hearts of those on the council.

God has spoken of repentance and judgment. vs. 30-34

Truth #6 - The true God that Paul is telling them about will judge those who reject Him.

God has been gracious throughout history – by withholding His judgment.

But the time of His grace and mercy will end – and He will judge the world by His standard of righteousness.

Read vs. 30-31

“Repent” – mean to change direction – change your mind – change your thinking and living.

See **Acts 14:15-17** – Paul in Lystra – similar message – God as creator – overlooking ignorance – but He has a witness.

“...you should turn from (*repent*) these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.

In past generations He allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet He did not leave Himself without witness...”

What about those who live in places that have never heard about Jesus?

We used to think those places were in foreign nations – like the jungles and deserts of Africa – or remote tribes in South America – and Indonesia and the Asian Pacific islands and nations.

But the reality today is there are people in the United States who have never heard about Jesus!

What about them – how is God near to them?

In **Romans 1**, Paul makes it clear that due to the evidence of God's existence and power revealed in General Revelation – in creation itself – that “men are without excuse.” (vs. 20).

Jeremiah 29:13

“You will seek Me and find Me, when you seek Me with all your heart.”

Psalm 145:18

“The LORD is near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth.”

God will judge the world – but it will be done by Jesus – the “man” God has raised from the dead.

The resurrected Jesus is not only our Savior – the One who conquered death and sin – but He was also raised to judge the world.

Well, when they heard Paul speak about someone being raised from the dead, the members of the Areopagus had heard enough.

Read vs. 32-33

Notice the mixed response.

“...some mocked”

...others said, “We will hear you again on this.”

Look at Paul's response – “So Paul went out from their midst.”

He didn't stay and argue – didn't pout – raise his voice. He simply left.

His job was to share the message – not convince others or argue them into belief.

1 Corinthians 1:23

“...we preach Christ crucified...folly to the Gentiles...”

But...where gospel seed is planted – the Holy Spirit causes some of the seed to take root!

Read vs. 34

It was not in vain.

It never is!

Even if nobody responds in faith – it’s never in vain when you tell others about Jesus.

1. You’ve been obedient to Jesus – you’ve obeyed the mission.
2. The truth of the gospel is shared – they now know about Jesus – it may take time for them to believe.
3. Their level of accountability and responsibility is increased by you sharing the truth – and their guilt at God’s judgment will have even more evidence that cannot be denied.

Interesting historical detail...

Dionysius the Areopagite – Some believe, due to tradition, that Dionysius became a leader in the church of Athens – and then one of the pastors leading the Corinthian church.

But this is unclear.

We only know that one of those who believed the gospel when Paul spoke with the Areopagus was a member of the council – Dionysius.

Nothing is known of the lady mentioned – Damaris.

This is the birth of the church in Athens.

Apply it...

1. Learn from Paul's example of how to tell others about Jesus.

Finds common ground... Doesn't belittle their beliefs or ridicule their lifestyle... He shares the truth – and then lets the truth soak in.

2. Theology is important in sharing the gospel.

Paul shares theology – facts about God and His nature – and facts about God's work in history.

3. Telling others of God's creative work – and of His coming judgment is always relevant.

Don't shy away from certain Biblical truths.

If the culture doesn't accept it – that's no reason not to share it!

Know the truth - share the truth in a respectful and gracious way – and let God's Word and His Spirit work in their life.

Closing prayer