

# From the Unknown to the Known God

## Acts 17:16-33

How do we, as Christ’s ambassadors, engage a modern culture with wisdom, courage, and gentleness—so that the gospel is not just another opinion in the noise, but a message carried on “beautiful feet” bringing good news?

Everywhere we look, the signs of moral fracture are undeniable. We read headlines that grieve our hearts: marriages collapsing,<sup>1</sup> cohabitation rising,<sup>2</sup> families breaking apart. We see a steady erosion of respect for authority—parents, teachers, police, government. Practices once unthinkable—abortion, euthanasia, gender confusion, rampant pornography, and the normalization of gambling—are now embraced as simple matters of personal preference. Even our political leaders model a public discourse filled with hostility, contempt, and demonization, shaping a culture where hatred seems more natural than holiness.

And how do we reach a society so deeply distracted—spending six or seven hours each day absorbing a constant stream of images, ideas, and ideologies?<sup>3</sup> The issue is not that people are no longer spiritual. According to the Pew Research Center, seven in ten adults still identify as “spiritual.”<sup>4</sup> The problem is that today’s spiritual marketplace is loud, complex, contradictory, and proudly self-invented. For many, the claim that there is one true God is merely one voice competing among a thousand others. Materialism, power, fame, and the worship of self have become the functional deities of our age. Some embrace atheism and pursue pleasure as life’s highest meaning. Others believe the divine is in everything and therefore cannot imagine pledging loyalty to only One.

In times like these, we might wonder: How do you reach people who are drowning in competing philosophies? How do you speak truth in a world that has redefined and dare I say outright rejected any form of absolute truth? How do you proclaim Christ where every worldview claims equal authority?

This is not a new challenge.

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the following website: [Facts About Divorce in America 2024 | Terry & Roberts](#)

<sup>2</sup> Taken from the following website: [For Young Adults, Cohabitation Is Up, Marriage Is Down](#)

<sup>3</sup> Taken from the following website: [Alarming Average Screen Time Statistics \(2025\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> Taken from the following website: [Spirituality Among Americans | Pew Research Center](#)

Today we turn to Paul in Acts 17—the apostle standing in the heart of Athens, a city overflowing with idols. Ancient writers said there were more gods in Athens than people.<sup>5</sup> Yet Paul did not begin with condemnation. He began by understanding their beliefs, engaging their questions, and building a bridge from their searching hearts to the God they did not yet know. In this passage, we will see that if we hope to reach our culture, we must do what Paul did:

we must understand before we speak, challenge without shaming, and share the gospel not with arrogance but with the genuine desire to reach the lost with the love and grace of God.

## Sensitized to Surroundings

To truly understand how Paul engaged the culture of his day, we must first walk with him through the magnificent city of Athens—a place bursting with art, intellect, and idolatry. On his second missionary journey, Paul arrived there after persecution had driven him out of Macedonia.<sup>6</sup> From about 480 to 404 BC, Athens had flourished—militarily, economically, and culturally—rising to become the crown jewel of the ancient world.<sup>7</sup> Though the Peloponnesian War eventually ended its era of dominance, the city’s influence endured for centuries. It was the home of great philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno, whose ideas still shape human thought today.<sup>8</sup> Towering statues of Zeus and Athena, along with countless temples, filled its streets. The most breathtaking of all was the Parthenon, a marble temple rising high on the Acropolis, dedicated to the goddess Athena, the city’s protector.<sup>9</sup> By the time Paul arrived, Athens had lost some of its political power but remained the intellectual and cultural heart of the Roman world.<sup>10</sup> Imagine walking those crowded streets—surrounded by idols and philosophers—yet daring to proclaim the Good News of the one true God!

While Paul may have admired the breathtaking architecture and the rich heritage of Athens, what gripped him most was not its beauty but its idolatry. Like Jeremiah, for whom God’s word was “a fire shut up in his bones” (Jeremiah 20:9), Paul could not remain silent while

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<sup>5</sup> James Montgomery Boice, [Acts: An Expository Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 296.

<sup>6</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, [“The Acts of the Apostles,”](#) in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: John and Acts*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 472.

<sup>7</sup> Tony Merida, [Exalting Jesus in Acts](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017), 243.

<sup>8</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, [“The Acts of the Apostles,”](#) in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: John and Acts*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 473.

<sup>9</sup> Tony Merida, [Exalting Jesus in Acts](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017), 243.

<sup>10</sup> Tony Merida, [Exalting Jesus in Acts](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017), 244.

surrounded by so many lost souls.<sup>11</sup> Those who have been born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5) have undergone a radical transformation — “the old has gone, the new is here” (2 Corinthians 5:17). God has replaced our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh and written His law upon them (Ezekiel 36:26; Jeremiah 31:33), enabling us to see the world through His eyes.

As Christ’s ambassadors, we walk the same streets as everyone else, but we do so with different eyes and a different purpose. Though we live in a world that is not our home, we are not called to imitate its ways, but to view art, music, sports, business, wealth, poverty, and culture itself through the lens of the cross. Like Paul, what compels us to engage our culture is not anger or fear, but a deep, Spirit-born love for people—a love that moves us to weep for them, to comfort them, and to point them to Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6).

Compelled by a burning love for God and for people, Paul began where God’s truth had already been revealed—among the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles in the synagogue—before bringing the message into the bustling marketplace of ideas. In the same way, if we are to proclaim the Gospel effectively to our culture, we must first know and live the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15). To be “blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation,” and to “shine among them like stars in the sky” (Philippians 2:15–16), we must begin with the household of faith—examining our own hearts and confessing those areas that still reflect the world more than the Kingdom of God.

When we first clean the inside of the cup (Matthew 23:25–26), our witness becomes credible and our worship sincere. In doing so, we direct all attention away from ourselves and toward the One who is our greatest joy—the Pearl of great price and the Treasure hidden in the field (Matthew 13:44–45). Such purity of heart and purpose allows the light of Christ to shine unhindered through us into a dark and searching world.

Once the heart is right before God, the message must move beyond the church doors—just as Paul carried it into the bustling marketplace of Athens, courageously confronting the competing philosophies of his day with the truth of Christ. Among his listeners were two dominant schools of thought. The Epicureans believed that both body and soul were made of fine particles that simply dissolved at death. For them, the gods were distant and unconcerned with human affairs, so life’s highest goal was to avoid pain and pursue pleasure. In contrast, the Stoics believed the divine was woven into all of nature, that reason itself was god, and that virtue was found in accepting one’s fate with calm endurance.<sup>12</sup> In short, the Epicureans said, “If it feels good, do it—there are no consequences,” while the Stoics said, “Grin and bear it—nothing can change your destiny anyway.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, [“The Acts of the Apostles,”](#) in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: John and Acts*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 472.

<sup>12</sup> Tony Merida, [Exalting Jesus in Acts](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017), 251.

<sup>13</sup> Tony Merida, [Exalting Jesus in Acts](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017), 251–252.

How challenging it is to present the gospel in a culture shaped by these same philosophies! Many today, like the Epicureans, live as if God does not exist, worshiping the god of self and believing that as long as no one is harmed, life's purpose is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. Others, like the Stoics, believe there may be a "higher power," but one who is aloof, unknowable, and indifferent—a god who demands nothing and forgives everything. For them, morality is relative and salvation is assumed for anyone deemed a "good person." Yet both worldviews are hopeless and hollow, offering no lasting peace and no true purpose.<sup>14</sup> Like Paul, we face the daunting task of proclaiming an unchanging gospel that calls for repentance and faith in one true God to a culture obsessed with novelty and self-expression. In seeking to believe everything, they have ended up believing nothing.

## Speaking with Similarity

As Paul reasoned with the people in the bustling marketplace, his message stirred both curiosity and controversy—so much so that he was brought before the Areopagus, the council of Athens where new ideas and philosophies were carefully examined. Some dismissed him as a mere "babbler"—a word used in ancient times to describe a "seed-picker," like a bird that gathered scattered thoughts and scraps of ideas without any real understanding.<sup>15</sup> Yet others were intrigued and wanted to hear more.

The Areopagus, whose name means "Hill of Ares," served as an influential council overseeing matters of politics, education, philosophy, religion, and even law.<sup>16</sup> It was here, before some of the most esteemed thinkers of the ancient world, that Paul boldly presented his case for Christ. Remarkably, he did not begin with Jewish history, for that would have meant little to them; nor did he quote Scripture, which they did not know. Instead, standing among altars and idols, Paul sought common ground—building a bridge from their search for meaning to the truth of the one true God. Among such diverse and skeptical minds, how could Paul reveal the timeless truth about the Creator and Redeemer of all?

Paul began not with accusation but with observation, acknowledging their genuine spiritual hunger—yet revealing that their search had strayed onto the broad road of human imagination rather than the narrow way of divine truth. As he stood among their many altars, he said, "I even found an altar with this inscription: To an unknown god" (Acts 17:23). That

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<sup>14</sup> Tony Merida, [\*Exalting Jesus in Acts\*](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017), 251–252.

<sup>15</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, ["The Acts of the Apostles,"](#) in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: John and Acts*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 474.

<sup>16</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, ["Areopagus,"](#) in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 167–168.

monument revealed something profound—their thirst for the divine was real, yet they admitted their knowledge of God was incomplete.

Even in a world that often seems dark and far from God, the Creator has “set eternity in the human heart” (Ecclesiastes 3:11)—a deep, unrelenting longing to know the One who made us. Every human soul bears this imprint. Even those who deny His existence end up worshiping other gods—power, pleasure, success, or self—and in doing so, they unwittingly reveal their built-in thirst to worship something or someone.<sup>17</sup> Like Paul, we too must begin our witness by pointing out the signposts God has left all around us—traces of His truth written in creation, conscience, and the human heart.

From their altar to the unknown, Paul now points them to the known—the self-revealing God whose fingerprints are etched upon all creation.<sup>18</sup> Everything visible and invisible serves as a vast theater of God’s glory, declaring His power and presence. As Paul later wrote to the church in Rome:

“For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.”

(Romans 1:20)

Without God, the universe would simply collapse into chaos,<sup>19</sup> for “in Him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17). In proclaiming this truth, Paul confronted both the Stoics and the Epicureans with the reality of a personal, sustaining Creator. To the Stoics, he declared that God is distinct from creation, not a force diffused throughout nature. To the Epicureans, he announced that God is not distant or indifferent, but the very Author of life<sup>20</sup> — “He Himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else” (Acts 17:25).

Though He is transcendent—wholly above and beyond His creation—He is also nearby. By His grace, He opens our spiritual eyes and renews our understanding so that we “would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from any one of us” (Acts 17:27). The God who formed the stars also shapes human hearts to long for Him. If creation itself declares His glory and our very breath depends on His will, what other response could there be but to bow our hearts before the One who gave us life?

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<sup>17</sup> Tony Merida, [Exalting Jesus in Acts](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017), 253.

<sup>18</sup> Tony Merida, [Exalting Jesus in Acts](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017), 254.

<sup>19</sup> Tony Merida, [Exalting Jesus in Acts](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017), 254.

<sup>20</sup> Tony Merida, [Exalting Jesus in Acts](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017), 254.

## Summoning to Surrender

The evidence of God’s power leaves us without excuse. What remains is our response: to turn from self-rule and surrender completely to the One who gives life and breath to all. Becoming a Christian is not about good deeds or moral effort, for “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8). Nor is salvation earned by merely acknowledging God’s existence, as if mental assent could replace heartfelt repentance. Scripture is clear: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), and “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

Paul’s message to the Athenians still echoes in our culture today. God’s patience toward a world of many idols should never be mistaken for indifference or weakness. The fact that He delays judgment is a sign of His mercy, not His approval (2 Peter 3:9). But the time of ignorance is coming to an end. God now commands all people everywhere to repent, “for He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed” (Acts 17:30–31). That man is Jesus Christ—the One whom God raised from the dead and appointed as Judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42).

There is no middle ground. Each of us must decide: to believe in the atoning sacrifice of Christ and receive the gift of eternal life, or to reject Him and face eternity separated from His presence. The same voice that calls us to surrender today will one day summon us to stand before His throne.

## Mixed Reactions from a Faithful Witness

Though Paul’s message was met with both ridicule and belief, the seed of truth had been planted proof that God can use even a whisper of faith to move mountains in the human heart. Jesus reminded His disciples that “the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few” (Matthew 9:37–38). As Christ’s ambassadors, we must always be ready to give an answer for the hope that is within us (1 Peter 3:15)—the hope found in the atoning sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Many will mock the gospel, and some will despise the “beautiful feet” that carry it (Romans 10:15). Yet others will listen quietly, and the Spirit will plant eternal seeds of righteousness in their hearts. Only a few in Athens believed that day, but the gospel took root—and in time, the church of Christ emerged from that soil.<sup>21</sup> The wind of the Spirit “blows wherever it pleases” (John 3:8), reminding us that we are not responsible for the outcomes of

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<sup>21</sup> James Montgomery Boice, [\*Acts: An Expository Commentary\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 301.

ministry—only for our obedience. Our calling is to proclaim with faith and joy the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, Savior, and King.

## Conclusion

Paul's time in Athens reminds us that the gospel still shines brightest in a world darkened by confusion and idolatry. Like him, we are called to stand courageously and compassionately in our own "marketplaces" — our workplaces, communities, and families — declaring that there is but one true God who made the world and gave His Son for its redemption. We must not lose heart when few respond, for the results have never been ours to control. The Spirit still moves where He wills (John 3:8), and the Word of God never returns empty (Isaiah 55:11). Our task is to sow the seed, to water faithfully, and to trust that God will bring the harvest in His time (1 Corinthians 3:6–7).

So let us go with confidence and compassion, knowing that even one heart turned to Christ is cause for heaven's rejoicing. May we be found faithful — proclaiming our Creator, Redeemer, Savior, and King — until the day every knee bow and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:10–11).