

¹⁶ Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols^a. ¹⁷ So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing *Gentiles*, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. ¹⁸ And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him^b. Some were saying, “What would this idle babbler wish to say?” Others, “He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection^c. ¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? ²⁰ For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean.” ²¹ (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.

²² So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. ²³ For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’ Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you^d. ²⁴ The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; ²⁵ nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all *people* life and breath and all things; ²⁶ and He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed times and the boundaries

^a 17:16 **Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols.** Once again God took His servant out of his personal comfort zone to put him in a place where he could be useful instead of comfortable. God was merciful, however, in the way He brought Paul gradually away from predominantly Jewish cities toward predominantly Gentile cities, thoroughly pagan in lifestyle. At Athens Paul had reached the model of pagan culture.

^b 17:18 **And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him.** Luke notes for us the two most prominent philosophies in Athens as representative of all that is hopeless in this world. These two contrasting philosophies can be identified as follows:

Epicureans, the followers of Epicurus (342-271 BC), believed:

- Seeking truth by pure reason is hopeless.
- Life should be lived for present pleasure. Happiness is the chief end of man.
- Whatever gods exist take no interest in the affairs of men (deism or agnosticism).
- Religion, raising a family and public office should be avoided.
- “That the world was made by a fortuitous concourse of atoms, which having been in a perpetual motion, at length accidentally jumped into this frame.”

Stoics, the followers of the teachings of Zeno and Chrysippus (3rd century BC) believed:

- Duty is very important and self must be repressed.
- God is all, all is God (pantheism).
- Emotion should be avoided because fate keeps you from controlling anything. Even God (or your god) is “under the dominion of fatal necessity.”
- Man is self-sufficient.

^c 17:18 **Some were saying, “What would this idle babbler wish to say?” Others, “He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.** The “foreign gods” they referred to were likely a misunderstanding of the terms Paul used. They must have thought that Jesus and *Anastasis* (Greek word for resurrection) were the names of yet more gods.

^d 17:23 **For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’ Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.** With confidence Paul gives these relativists something absolute to which they can cling. He offers them hope that their existence is not the random product of chance, nor is it the blind victim of fate. Paul’s offer is a person who cares for, rules over, and saves sinners.

of their habitation^a, ²⁷ that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸ for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children^b.’ ²⁹ Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. ³⁰ Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent, ³¹ because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.”

³² Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some *began* to sneer, but others said, “We shall hear you again concerning this.” ³³ So Paul went out of their midst. ³⁴ But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them^{c, d}.

^a 17:24-26 **The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all *people* life and breath and all things; and He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation.** This is a simple statement of faith. Paul wished to clearly but simply identify the God these people did not know.

The sinful exchange of God’s glory for man’s—of which Paul later wrote in Romans 1:22-23—is one that had taken place in Athens. God made the world for men to live in, but men sought to create images and temples for God to live in. The Athenians had merely done what man for centuries had already done: create gods in the image of and under the control of man. Paul argues that God does not need our help.

^b 17:27-28 **that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’** This is not a contradiction of Paul’s statement to the Romans (3:11) that “there is... no one who seeks God.” Depraved men do seek answers, but cannot find them (him) apart from a work of grace. In some ways they are like a basketball player searching for his contact lens on the gym floor. If only he had what he was looking for he’d be able to find what he is looking for.

This is also not a contradiction of Galatians 3:26. All people are children of God in the sense that they are made in His image. Only a few people are children of God in the sense that they have turned from their sins to Him for salvation. A few who bear His image are also His heirs.

^c 17:33-34 **So Paul went out of their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.** This is the visible end result of communicating the gospel of Christ. People really do change. God writes His law inwardly on their hearts, but that new birth results outwardly in faith and works. That new birth results in believers publicly confessing their faith and identifying with one another. Dionysius and Damaris might have been the most unlikely individuals to turn from open paganism to faith in Jesus, but that is the way our God works. That is the church and you find such churches placed by God in the wake of all of missionary journeys recorded in this book.

^d 17:16-34 This text is an excellent example of the way believers should engage the non-Christian world. If you seek to reach lost people like Paul did, you will:

1. Study your audience (verses 16-17). This does not mean you must become an expert at paganism, but that you simply learn about those to whom you are speaking. Paul evidently learned a lot during those days he walked the streets of Athens alone.
2. Make yourself visible (verses 18-21). Your best friends should not be the people you are trying to reach, but you should not hide from them. Paul had more opportunities because he went where the lost people were.

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3. Establish common ground (verses 22-23). You may not have much in common, but the effort to find the littlest thing will be a platform from which to begin. Paul found in them an interest in spiritual things, something he also had.
 4. Establish what makes Jesus Christ distinct from their viewpoint (verses 24-28). You do need to point out why you are different. Paul took on their philosophy in a gentle manner.
 5. Establish why they need Jesus (verses 29-31). Jesus means nothing to those who think they are O.K. Paul pointed out the need to repent of idolatry.
 6. Provide opportunity for follow-up (verse 32-34). “Invitations” do not need music and an altar, but truth and the Spirit of God. Paul did not fully present the gospel, but evidently invited the people to hear more, after which they turned to Christ.

The better picture here, though, is the God Paul wished to introduce to the people. Notice the things about the living God Paul communicated:

1. He is jealous for His own glory.
2. He is knowable.
3. He is big.
4. He is powerful.
5. He demands repentance.
6. He is the Rescuer.