

## “Starting Where People Are” // Acts 17:16–34 // SENT # 19

---

In college I was part of this thing called “the North Carolina Student Legislature” where all these colleges from around NC came together and presented bills and acted like you were in Congress. It had no effect at all on any laws, but it was fun. I was in my hotel room and a guy I had led to Christ... “*Grab your Bible quick and come here... They had questions about the Bible, I told them you could answer them.*”

That’s a situation like Paul found himself in in Acts 17. Would you know how to handle a situation? If you are a believer, I think you’re going to see from Paul a model for how to engage people who know very little about the Christian faith; if you’re not a believer, I hope I’ll be able to engage you with where you are and the questions you have.

### Acts 17:16–34

[16] Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens,

- Even after Rome’s ascendancy, Athens was the intellectual capital of the world. Think Oxford, Harvard, Yale and Duke all rolled into one.
- It was also a center for art and athletics... It housed one of the world’s largest stadiums for sports and was the site, of course, of the original Olympics.

his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

- There was an ancient saying in Athens: “It’s easier to find a god in Athens than a man.” I’ve had a chance to be there a couple of times... everywhere you look in Athens you see a temple ruin.
- Areopagus on the Acropolis. Temples of Apollyon and Zeus.

[17] So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons (always where he started), and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

- The marketplace in ancient cities was the cultural center, not just the place you shopped. So, he’s not just creepily hanging out in Target at the checkout aisle.

[18] Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him.

- **Epicureans were basically** hedonists. They believed that the gods were composed of atoms so fine they dwelt in the space between the worlds, and they don’t care about this world, so live it up.
- **The Stoics were pantheists**, who believed god was in everything, similar to today’s Hindus. They were all about self-control. Their ideal was imperturbability: Unable to be perturbed. Pain doesn’t bother you; pleasure doesn’t seduce you. Think Spock.

~~Both of these were more sloppy philosophies than carefully thought ones. (Historical note: Greek philosophy was in a state of unsure footing because of the split between Socrates and his brilliant student, Aristotle.~~

- ~~(Whenever two major ideas come into conflict, both of which make sense and are endorsed by popular leaders, people become pragmatic.) Both guys make sense; I can’t figure it out. So people develop a pragmatic approach to truth. What works; what do you prefer.~~
- ~~We’re like that today. You’ve got scientists who say that God is not necessary at all to explain the world... and then you’ve got other people who demonstrate that God is absolutely necessary). Stephen Hawking and Billy Graham. So people develop a “don’t care” attitude and try to take whatever works.)~~

~~So that’s most of these people... they’re very spiritual, but that’s different than an honest search for God.~~

And some said, “What does this babbling wish to say?” Babbling: very derogatory term: it means **bird that picks up seeds** and spits them back out without digesting them. Think, a **chicken**. Babblers were **people who rambled on about ideas they picked up from other people without really understanding them**. A *second-class mind*. It used to really discourage me that wherever I went, I was considered to be a second-class mind because I was a committed Christian. I’m the knuckle-dragging Neanderthal whose never actually read a book and wants to marry his sister... I used to get discouraged, but I realize that it’s always been like that. **Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.** (BTW: there’s a little clue as to where every discussion Paul got into was headed.)

[19] And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? *Historians say that these philosophers were always on the lookout for new gods they could add to their Parthenon. So this is an interview. Does this new faith have the intellectual chops to be added to our Parthenon?*

Think Paul is going to interview well?

[22] So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: (And, btw, this whole sermon takes only 2 minutes to read, but speeches at the Areopagus were never known for their brevity, so each sentence here probably represents about 20-minute of discourse. You’re just getting the outline.)

“Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. The word translated “religious” could be **positive or negative**. Some translations say “superstitious,” which would, of course, be negative. But it can also mean something like “spiritual,” which would have been a compliment. I think Paul meant the double entendre.

[23] For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ This was their “**just in case**” god. “Just in case” the real god did not get covered in the thousands of statues, here’s to you, unknown god. What’s more is **all around the Parthenon are IMAGES of struggle**—it represented their struggle to figure life out, make life work; Paul saw in these a struggle for God. **What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.**

He **started with their** question. (This is **significantly different** than how he engages elsewhere. **Acts 17:2**, “Paul went into the synagogue... and reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead.” For these guys, they don’t accept the authority of Scripture, so he starts with their questions.)

Now watch what he does: [24] The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, [25] nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. He **points out logical problems** with their approach to God. He asks them, “*Does it make sense that the God who created everything could be contained in a temple or would need you to put food out for him?*”

[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, [27] that they should seek him, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.

- He’s actually doing two things here. **First, he’s saying, “The real God** is not some tribal deity who has jurisdiction over a limited sphere (they had ‘the god of the sea’ and ‘the god of the Ephesians’ and ‘the god of good sex’); the real God is the Creator of the whole earth and all mankind.”
- Second, he’s saying **the greatest pursuit** in life is to find him. Greek and Roman gods were always a means to **some other thing**

- **Artemis:** goddess of prosperity, money. If you wanted that, you went to her temple and made offerings.
- **Athena:** the goddess of wisdom; politics. In her temple they had this picture of Zeus' head being split open and her being taken out... If you wanted to be smart, to have wisdom, you worshipped her.
- **Nike:** the goddess of victory, worshipped by athletes and warriors and Michael Jordan, who made you run faster, jump higher, and soar above the competition.
- **Aphrodite:** goddess of sexuality, beauty, fertility.
- **Cloacina** the goddess of the sewer system. I'm not sure what she was worshipped for; or even less how you made an offering to her... don't want to know... sometimes we light a candle in our bathrooms; maybe that counts.)
- All these gods were a means to something: prosperity; power; smoother bowel movements... whatever was important to you.

The real God is so glorious and transcendent, Paul says, that he is his own reward, and not to be sought as a means for anything else... Yet (even though he is so glorious and transcendent) he is actually not far from each one of us, [28] for "In him we live and move and have our being"; now, this is interesting. See the quote marks? This is a quote, but not from Scripture, from a song written about Zeus in 600 b.c. as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring." That was from a poem called *Phainomena* written by a Stoic poet.<sup>1</sup> Paul is well-versed enough in their culture that he can show they've stumbled onto truth and are asking some of the right questions.

Now, his conclusion against their religious approach: [29] Being then God's offspring, 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

---

<sup>1</sup> The first writer was Epimenedes. The second poet was Aratus, in 330 b.c. Paul quotes this same poet in Titus from the same poem, only two lines down.

man. If God is the Creator, you're foolish to think you can reduce him to something you can hold in your hands.

And then, at last, he goes into the gospel. [30] The times of ignorance God overlooked, (which just means God stayed uninvolved, leaving you to your idolatrous error) but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, [31] because he has fixed a day 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." Jesus has come; he is God descended from heaven; and God have given us proof that he is the true God by raising him from the dead. Assurance (vs. 31) means "proof."

We should follow Paul's pattern:

- *Be provoked by idolatry;*
- *Find points of agreement;*
- *Expose the insufficiency of their answers;*
- *Proclaim the greatness of God;*
- *Drive toward the resurrection.*

### 1. Be provoked by the idolatry

- When Paul saw the impressive structures of Athens, they did not intimidate him; nor did they seduce him; they provoked him.
- **When you see idolatrous structures in our society, what is your reaction?** Tim Keller: Look at whatever buildings in your city are the biggest—those usually indicate the idols.
  - RDU: Money; Sports... what does it do to you? It's ok to be impressed... but does it also grieve you that more glory is given to those things than to God?
  - When you watch things like the Oscars; Academy Awards.. what emotion fills you? Admiration or heartbreak?
- If you're not provoked by the idolatry, the sensuality... you are worldly.
  - But if you're one of the ones who just sees that, gets angry and says, "To hell with the world," you're out of touch with the gospel, too.

- Paul was provoked by the idolatry, but he didn't run from the people of Athens, he ran toward them, in compassion.
- This is what we need to be, Summit. People deeply aware of our culture; able to dialogue with it. But untainted by it.
- We have to get to know our culture; to pay attention to it. That's the only way Paul was upset by the idolatry of the culture: *he had spent some time getting to know it*. Most of us get all peeved about where our culture is headed, but we're not actually listening to what people are saying. They are crying out for God!
  - **We send people overseas to be missionaries** and they spend months studying the culture to understand the people there. The sad thing is, most of them have better insight into **that** culture than we do into **our own**.

## 2. Find points of agreement

- I won't spend long on this, but the heart of mankind is incurably religious... God **created us to worship** and know him; it's a **primary drive**, like hunger for food. Well, **because of sin**, it's been corrupted, but the remnants of it are still there.
  - All of us ask **ultimate questions**; all of us search for meaning; all of us put ultimate value on certain things that we live for.
  - That search can and **should be affirmed** where it can.
- **I've told atheists**: "I admire your passion for truth. I can see that you want to be a moral person who is intellectually honest."
- I've told **non-religious fathers**, "I can see you really care about the future of your children." Or "I admire the way you want your life to matter."
- I've told more, shall we say, **liberal activists**, who hold positions very different than my own, "I'm touched by how compassionate you are and your desire see it the brokenness of the world healed."

## 3. Expose the insufficiency of false answers

- **Before you present Jesus as the answer**, sometimes you need to show that their current answers aren't working. That people have

adopted a philosophy that may work for them in the short run, but won't hold up to scrutiny.

### For example...

- **When I see that someone has really given themselves to an idol...** I'll ask, "Is it working?"
  - **Do the people who have the god that you are looking for appear satisfied to you?**
    - Money. Paris Hilton; Donald Trump.
  - **Does it promise you security?** What happens if the Wall Street crash? Does it help you after you die?
    - If I can **quote their own prophets** to show the problem, I'll do that...
    - Man climbing the ladder of success...
    - Saw an interview with Zack Efron, May 2014, explaining why in his mid 20's he had to check into an alcohol-rehab facility: "*I had done films back-to-back-to-back. I was burnt out. There was something lacking, some sort of hole that I couldn't really fill up. I was just so deep into my work, it was really the only thing I had. . . . I mean, you're in your 20s, single, going through life in Hollywood, you know?*" No, Zac, we don't know, because you have all the things most of us are giving our lives to obtain!
  - "Is your god worth the things you sacrifice for it?" If you're god is money, you sacrifice family, integrity to get it. Is it worth it?
- **I've asked activists who are concerned about global suffering, but are seeking to do so apart from the gospel**: "So you want to give food and education to everyone. **Does those things cure the problems of man?** Education and money haven't cured the problems in our country. You think **government is the answer?** Point me to some really powerful government officials in the past where things have turned out well. I ask them, "**What hope do you give to people who have been crushed** by the wheels of

injustice and are now dead? “Sorry. Stinks for you. There is no justice beyond this life?”

- I’ve asked people who say, “**Evolution explains everything; we have no need of God**”: If you think evolution explains everything, that given enough time and space nature will naturally work itself into higher and higher levels of complexity, where did nature get that quality? And where did nature come from to begin with? Why is there something rather than nothing?
  - Interview with Hawking... You can’t just stop there. Are we really expected to believe that **nothing x nobody equals everything**?
- **When I talk to people who say that all roads lead to God...** How do you know that? Aren’t you presuming the one thing you are denying to everyone else? In order to say that all roads lead to God...
- **To those who say all moral values are equal...** Do you really believe that? Peter Singer argues that society would be better off if we eliminated those with birth defects up to two years old and euthanized the old... so that should be legal. Is that moral value “equal?” Some societies believe that life works better if you keep women uneducated and at home. Are we prepared to say those moral values are equal, too?
- **When I talk to atheists**, who are really concerned to show that they can still be moral people, I say, “I admire that, but if there is no God, is there really any basis to say something is right or wrong? If you say to someone, “You ought to do this, even if it is not in your best interests,” “ought” implies some divine law that supersedes your interests of the moment. Atheists can account for moral feelings in us (as some kind of evolutionary advantage), but they can’t account for moral obligations.

Francis Schaeffer called that **blowing the roof off** the current house so they’ll seek shelter elsewhere.

- **Mankind is incurably religious**; which means he asks a lot of the right questions, but only Jesus and the gospel gives satisfying answers.

- **Sometimes the answer is in the religion itself: When I lived among Muslims**, I couldn’t convince them of why Jesus had to die... “I am more merciful than your god.”
- **You say, “Well, I don’t know as much as you, or Paul, so what should I do?” A. Study.** If you love somebody, won’t you figure out how to communicate something important to them? I don’t know **sign language** because it’s hard to learn, and no one close enough to me is deaf. But I guarantee you if one of my kids was deaf, and that were the only way I could communicate with them, I’d learn sign language. **If you love people around you**, and you believe the gospel; won’t you figure out every possible way to communicate it to them better? B. When you don’t know what else to do, just ask questions. That’s what I do. And eventually they say something opens the door for the gospel.

#### 4. Proclaim the greatness of God

- The core of Paul’s message was that the true God is so much bigger than their idols could contain...
  - One of the **chief characteristics of all false religions** is a truncated (shrunk down) view of God. God gets reduced to a size we can easily explain, manipulate, or use to get something else we want like prosperity or power.
- **The real God is so large, and infinite, and wise, that he is often unexplainable.** And sometimes that is frustrating to me. It leaves me with questions I can’t answer. I want to be able to explain everything. **But if God is infinitely wise**, then of course there are going to be things about him and his plan that I can’t understand.
  - 46 oz brain.
- **“If God were small enough to be understood, he would not be big enough to be worshipped.” Evelyn Underhill**
  - **You see, a lot of people say this:** God is infinite in love and power... but also infinite in wisdom. What is greater... the

gap between my knowledge and God's...? Think about how much greater God's power is than yours...<sup>2</sup>

- The real God is **going to baffle you sometimes**; and he certainly is **not just a means** to an end, like a better family, more prosperity, or a better life. The real God is better than all those things, and he is his own reward.
- **Don't you know that?** Isn't there something inside of you that tells you that is true? Isn't that "the unknown God" you are searching for?

## 5. Drive toward the resurrection

- This is where Paul gets to... it's where he's always headed. It's where the **greatness of God is most on display**.
- **And the gospel is fundamentally an announcement, not an explanation:** Jesus Christ claimed to be God in the flesh, sent here to save us.
- The question: **Is he who he says he is?** The **most important question** he ever asked, or that you'll ever consider, is his question, "Who do you say that I am?"

Religion and philosophy ask: *Who is right?* The gospel says: *Who is Jesus?*

Religion and philosophy ask: *What is true?* The gospel says: *What happened in the death and resurrection?*

Religion and philosophy ask: *What does God want from us?* The gospel says: *Look what God has done for us!*

---

<sup>2</sup> ~~Bart Erhman: "Purposeless evil": No see 'um: If God really is infinite, I accept as a given that there will be things about his wisdom that will blow our mind.~~

Religion and philosophy ask: *What kind of sacrifice do I have to make to gain God's acceptance?* The gospel says: *Look at the sacrifice God has made on our behalf.*<sup>3</sup>

**Christianity does not come to us by way of explanation, but revelation.** Not, is it a better explanation, but is Jesus who he says he is. You see, when you don't know what else to do, present the claims of Jesus. And ask, "Who do you say that he is?"

[32] Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. (It really is an outrageous claim) But others said, "We will hear you again about this." [33] So Paul went out from their midst. [34] But some men joined him and believed.

**Three reactions:** we will be getting these. You should be able to right now identify people in each category: those that mock; those that are thinking about it; and those that have joined you. If not, you're probably not preaching the message.

- And, btw, notice the order of that last one. [34] But some men **joined him and believed**. Not "believed and joined him." But joined him—became his disciples, and eventually believed.
- Nobody got saved there on the spot. That's often the win in a postmodern or pluralistic context—getting someone to come to church with you; read the Bible with you!

## Conclusion (MUSIC)

**Here we are in our city**—surrounded by idolatry. **Are we provoked by the idols?** Are we seeing our city through gospel eyes? Or are you worldly, at home in this city, desirous of its idols?

Are you moved by compassion to the point that you have to say something? Or, are you like, "To hell with the city!"

---

<sup>3</sup> Inspired by a similar list of questions Andy Stanley asked in a sermon on Acts 17 at Northpoint Community.

- We love people too much to leave the city, but we also love them too much to leave them in their idols! We are provoked, and we must speak up for God's glory and their salvation!

Here's why: Because that's what Jesus did for us. He saw us in our idolatry; was provoked; but instead of condemning us and writing us off, he ran to us, showed us the insufficiency of our answers without him, and then revealed God to us in his death and resurrection! As he has done to us, let us now do to others!

### **Invitation:**

- Maybe you see the truth of the gospel today: Maybe you have a life philosophy that's just not working. You realize you were created by a glorious God to know and be loved by that God... and nothing else is making your life work.
- Maybe you are thinking of people you need to engage like this and you need to ask God for strength!