

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

Athenian Apologetics

Acts 17:16–34

Let's take our Bibles together and turn to Acts 17. The title for today's message is "Athenian Apologetics." And let me illustrate what follows in today's passage with the following aphorism: "If the only tool in your toolbox is a hammer, then every problem looks like a nail."

Well, the Apostle Paul is good with a hammer. He knows how to hammer home the gospel with his Jewish brethren. But Paul is not a one-trick pony. The audience in Athens in Acts 17:16–34 is quite different from his typical Jewish or God-fearing interlocutors. And so Paul has to use a different tack in Athens.¹

Instead of starting his gospel-work with a shared understanding of who God is and the truth of the OT, Paul has to go back, way back, to the very beginning. He's got to start with the basics—there's one God. How basic is that? There's one God, and he doesn't exist in idols made by human hands. And what we learn in today's passage is how we can use different tools in our "apologetics toolbox" to get the gospel to those who need to hear it.²

But first, let's review and get up to speed with where we are in the book of Acts. When we last saw Paul, he was getting thrown out of Berea in Acts 17. In fact, Paul has been thrown out of multiple cities in Macedonia. That was the regular pattern on this second missionary journey. It went something like this: 1) Paul preaches the gospel, 2) some people get saved, 3) other people get bent out of shape, 4) the church gets planted, and 5) and then Paul gets thrown out of town. That happened in Philippi. It happened in Thessalonica. And it happened in Berea.

Just as a refresher, look at Acts 17:13.

¹³ But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. ¹⁴ Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. ¹⁵ Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.

So Paul gets chased out of Berea. And as we pick up on his journey in Acts 17:16, we see that he lands in Athens. This city is about two hundred miles south of Berea (see map below).

¹ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 377–8: "It should be noted that Paul never compromised the basic Christian principles of God as Creator and Judge and the resurrection of Christ. In the end these were the most difficult concepts for the Athenians to grasp, but there could be no accommodation on these. Bridge building is essential in Christian witness, particularly when addressing different cultures, as missionaries must often do. Paul's Areopagus address provides both a precedent and a pattern for this essential task."

² Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 573: "Too many Christians know their own message but understand far too little about how and why others think as they do... Whether in informal conversation or in formal settings, the ability to set forth the faith at a level appropriate to the setting is a valuable talent."



Paul Travels to Athens³

Athens is a long way from where Paul was. And it's a different region of the Roman Empire altogether. Paul is no longer in Macedonia; he's in Achaia. So Paul has been essentially ejected out of Macedonia. And now he finds himself in the famous city of Athens.

Now let me say just a little bit about this city, Athens. Athens was the ancient center of Greek culture and society.⁴ Its heyday was about three to five hundred years before Christ.⁵ And Greece, for a time, ruled the world. Athens was particularly renowned in ancient Greece for its philosophy, art, literature, science, athletics, architecture, and military. Even today some of Athens's grandeur can be seen. Below is a picture of the Parthenon, a very famous structure, which you can go and visit today.⁶



The Parthenon in Athens⁷

³ Atlas taken from Logos Bible Study, Computer software. *Logos Bible Study Atlas* (Bellingham: Faithlife, LLC), November 6, 2025. Some geographical points added by author.

⁴ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 27: "Even though the Romans conquered Athens in 146 B.C. Athens retained her supremacy, because the Romans loved everything Greek and so did not change her status as a free city. Despite all her glory, Athens was empty because she was living on the memories of the past. In philosophy she simply repeated the echoes of men long gone. Her art was no longer innate overflow but a lingering reflex."

⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 365–6: "In Paul's day Athens was but a shadow of its former glory in its 'golden age' in the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. Corinth was now the leading city of Greece commercially and politically. Even Athens' native population had dwindled, estimated at some 5,000 voting citizens. But this was considerably augmented by the nonnative population, particularly the artists, the students, and the tourists. And there were the buildings and the works of art, mute testimony to its former grandeur. This is not to say that Athens was no longer an important city. It was still considered the cultural and intellectual center of the Roman Empire, and it is in this perspective that Luke portrayed it."

⁶ Sproul, *Acts*, 306: "In every ancient Greek city, the highest point of elevation housed a temple to some god or goddess, usually the patron deity of the particular city. Such locations were called the 'high places,' which, all the way back in antiquity, we read about in the Old Testament. Pagans built altars there for use in worship because the high places, the places of highest elevation, were considered closest to heaven and were therefore the point of supremacy for all who dwelt in the area."

⁷ This picture is part of "The Museum Collection" of Todd Bolen and A.D. Riddle. Used here with permission.

Athens was the city of the great philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Athens was the birthplace of democracy. But despite Athens's reputation, it was not as prominent a city in Paul's day as it had been in previous centuries. The power structure in the ancient world had moved from Greece to Rome.

But even though Athens wasn't the great political and military power that it once was, it was still an intellectual power. It was a place where philosophy and the human intellect flourished. **A good corollary to Athens in America is the city of Boston. Boston used to be the center of the American experiment. But it got trumped by other cities. And now it is known primarily for its educational institutions (e.g., Harvard, MIT).**

Well Athens in Paul's day was a lot like that. And it was a place, as we'll see in just a second, where the gospel was desperately needed.

Look at **verse 16**.

¹⁶ Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens,

Waiting for who? Paul was waiting for Silas and Timothy to rejoin him (see **17:15**).

¹⁶ Now while Paul was waiting for [Silas and Timothy] at Athens, his spirit was provoked⁸ within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.⁹

Now let me just paint you a picture of what Paul experienced in Athens. Because I don't want you to think wrongly that Paul was a little Jewish boy from Jerusalem that had never been to the big city. No, Paul grew up in Tarsus, a pagan Roman city. Paul had travelled extensively throughout the Roman Empire. **This wasn't his first rodeo in a city full of idols.** He wasn't prudish about idolatry.

But the pervasiveness of the idols and the idolatry in Athens was so disturbing for Paul, that his spirit was grieved inside of him.¹⁰ So this idolatry was even more egregious than any other place that Paul had visited.¹¹

Listen to this. This is a statement from **Clinton Arnold's** commentary on **Acts**. This'll give you a flavor of what Paul was experiencing in Athens. **"As Paul journeys into the heart of the city, he feels a sense of awe at the impressive architecture and grandeur of the immense buildings from this center of Hellenistic culture. What he only heard about previously, he now sees firsthand. Entering the city, the [temple of Hephaestus] first comes into view. This is a beautiful Doric style temple dedicated to the god Hephaestus and the goddess Athena built between 449–444 B.C."**¹²

⁸ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 130: "Provoked does not bring out the full force of *paroxunō*, which means 'to become angry, or infuriated.' Luke used the corresponding noun to describe the "sharp disagreement" between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:39)."

⁹ MARTIN LUTHER: "Paul had not come there so that he could preach but so that he could wait. But when he saw that the city was devoted to the worship of idols, he was not able to be silent, but the Holy Spirit spurred him on so that he opened his mouth. This city was famous because of its great wisdom; nevertheless, it truly was much more devoted to the worship of idols than to anything else." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 243–4.

¹⁰ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 723: "The traditional gods were worshiped in several temples. Zeus, the father of the gods, was worshiped on the Acropolis, in the stoa on the west side of the agora, on the altar in front of the stoa, and at other temples and altars in the city. Athene, the goddess of wisdom and the patron of the city, had three temples on the Acropolis, a small temple in the agora, and was also worshiped in the Bouleuterion and in the temple of Hephaistos. Demeter, the goddess of vegetation and fertility, was worshiped in the Eleusinion located on the road from the agora to the Acropolis. Apollo was worshiped in a temple located next to the Stoa of Zeus; a monumental statue of the god was discovered in the area of the agora. Artemis was worshiped on the Acropolis as Artemis Brauronia and in the agora as Artemis Boulaia. Aphrodite was worshiped in at least two temples located along the way up to the Acropolis; over 300 statues of Aphrodite have been discovered in excavations in the city. Other temples were dedicated to the worship of Ares, Asclepius, Dionysos, Hekate, Hephaistos, Hera, Heracles, Hermes, Hestia, Pan, Poseidon, the Twelve (Olympian?) Gods, the Phrygian Mother-Goddess; the Egyptian gods Isis, Sarapis, Harpocrates, and Anubis; abstractions including Demos (the People of Athens) and Nike (Victory), the emperors, as well as heroes such as Theseus, Hippothoon, Antiochos, Ajax, Leos, Erechtheus, Aigeus, Oineus, Akamas, Kekrops, Pandion, Harmodios, Aristogeiton, Eurysakes, Epitegios, Strategos, Iatros and Kallistephanos."

¹¹ Sproul, *Acts*, 306: "Luke tells us that when Paul saw this city that was given over to idols, he had a visceral reaction. He wasn't just a little bit peeved or annoyed; his heart was in turmoil. His insides were in a paroxysm of distress as he looked across this city noted for its brilliance but drowning in evil."

¹² Clinton E. Arnold, *Acts*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, vol. 2B, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 168.



Temple of Hephaestus¹³

“Just across from this is the Stoa of Attalus, a two-storied colonnaded building.”¹⁴



Stoa of Attalus (rebuilt in the 1950s with money from American donors)¹⁵

“Towering above all, however, is the magnificent Parthenon, a Doric temple dedicated to Athena Polias (447–438 BC) and sitting atop the Acropolis as a crown. The rectangular temple measures 228 feet by 101 feet (23,000 square feet) and includes Doric columns that stand thirty-four feet high with a diameter at the base of six feet. The columns support a roof made of richly ornamented slabs of marble depicting a variety of scenes. Inside the temple stands a thirty-nine-foot high statue of Athena.”¹⁶

¹³ This picture is part of “The Museum Collection” of Todd Bolen and A.D. Riddle. They are used here with permission.

¹⁴ Clinton E. Arnold, *Acts*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, vol. 2B, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 168.

¹⁵ This picture is part of “The Museum Collection” of Todd Bolen and A.D. Riddle. They are used here with permission.

¹⁶ Clinton E. Arnold, *Acts*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, vol. 2B, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 168–169.



Parthenon on the Acropolis¹⁷

The Acropolis itself, a large limestone plateau measuring 1050 feet by 512 feet and rising 512 feet high, stands impressively at the center of the city... Also on the Acropolis is the Erechtheum for the worship of Athena and Poseidon [and] the temple of Athena Nike... As Paul takes in all of these grand sights, he first passes through the Greek Agora (‘market place’) and then the Roman Agora [“Ancient descriptions testify that the marketplace was virtually lined with idols”¹⁸]. Standing prominently in the Roman market is a forty-foot octagonal structure housing a waterclock and sundials known as the... ‘Tower of the Winds’ because it contains carved representations of the eight wind gods.”¹⁹



Tower of the Winds²⁰

John MacArthur writes, “Every public building was dedicated to a god, and statues of gods filled the city.”²¹ A pagan writer named Petronius sarcastically said it was easier to find a “god” in Athens than a man.²² The Roman author Pliny reckons that in his day the city of Athens had at least 73,000 statues.²³ “The streets lined with idols of false deities, framed by the architectural magnificence of the Parthenon and the Acropolis, were dazzling to the eye.”²⁴

¹⁷ This picture is part of “The Museum Collection” of Todd Bolen and A.D. Riddle. They are used here with permission.

¹⁸ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 366.

¹⁹ Clinton E. Arnold, *Acts*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, vol. 2B, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 168–169.

²⁰ This picture is part of “The Museum Collection” of Todd Bolen and A.D. Riddle. Used here with permission.

²¹ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 130.

²² MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 129–30.

²³ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 722.

²⁴ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 27.

Do you get the picture of what Athens was like in Paul's day? There were gods and references to gods everywhere in Athens. Because

But Paul wasn't dazzled! He didn't walk around Athens like some gawking tourist. He was grieved by the prevalence of idols and idolatry. It's the grief that a person feels when he or she sees people trapped in bondage. Paul's spirit was provoked inside of him because of the bondage of this idolatry.²⁵

Let me ask you this, church, have any of you ever been provoked by the false religions of this world? Has the Holy Spirit inside of you ever grieved over idolatry?²⁶ I can think of two instances in my life where that has happened. One was when I was in Kuala Lumpur, and I visited a Hindu holy place. It was this monastery built into a cave by the ancient Hindus. And it was a freaky place full of idols and worshippers and also tourists like me who cluelessly walked through this "holy" site. And there were all these rituals that the Hindu monks were doing. And there were idols strewn all over the place.

And I remember being grieved by the bondage of these rituals. And also, I remember this vividly, there were monkeys everywhere. And the tourists would purchase snacks and bottled water and ice cream. And as you were walking around, these monkeys would come up to you and steal food out of your hands. And you couldn't do anything about it because the monkeys were sacred. One of those monkeys could be one of your reincarnated ancestors. And I remember grieving over the bondage of that false religion.

The other time, I remember grieving in my spirit over idolatry... are you ready for this? ... It was at Soldierfield in Chicago. I used to work at the stadium, and I would walk about a mile from the train station to the stadium. And it was not uncommon for me to see people draped in sports paraphernalia, drunk, fighting, and absolutely obsessed with their sports team. And they didn't come to Soldierfield to have a good time and watch their favorite team play. They came for a worship service. They came to venerate their idols!

Now it doesn't really matter if your false religion is Hinduism or Roman polytheism. It doesn't matter if it's football or politics. Sometimes people worship false gods. And sometimes people worship God's good gifts like food, sex, marriage, family, or football. And all false worship should grieve us!²⁷

Write this down as the first point from the text.

1) False religions should **grieve** us and provoke us into **action** (Acts 17:16–18)

"Pastor Tony, I'm so glad that we don't struggle with idolatry in our day!" Listen, an idol is anything and everything that we put in the place of God. God said, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:3).

For some Americans, their little-g god is money or sex or influence. For others it's work or family or their independence. Christians can struggle with this too. Your idol can be your hobby or your personal morality or what other people think about you.

John Calvin said once that the human heart is an idol-making factory.²⁸ He said, **"Every one of us is, even from his mother's womb, [an] expert in inventing idols."**²⁹ He taught that we as Christians are

²⁵ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 473: "Though Paul was in a rage when he saw the idols, he acted with restraint and respect in his outward behavior among the idolaters."

²⁶ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 66: "Do you experience the same kind of provocation when you see people around you serving a false god? What Paul saw were eternal souls worshiping something that could not save." Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 27: "As believers, our hearts should ache and our eyes blur at what we see around us — ignorant souls denying the one God and giving allegiance to false deities. If we experience no inner paroxysms, we either have not truly been redeemed by Jesus Christ or we have become apathetic to the things of God."

²⁷ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 66: "Christians must adopt the same heart and mindset as Paul. Too often, Christians apathetically look at the world around them and see people worshiping idols. Outrage does not fill the hearts of Christians as they see the name of God defamed and glory given to something other than Yahweh. Indifference has replaced zeal, and lethargy has drowned passion. When God's people see idols worshiped, a righteous anger should burn within their soul."

²⁸ Calvin wrote this in his *Institutes*, "The human heart is a perpetual idol factory" (*hominis ingenium perpetuam, ut ita loquar, esse idolorum fabricam*). Here's how this statement is translated in John Calvin and Henry Beveridge, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 128: "Hence we may infer, that the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols..."

continually tempted to make temporal things into ultimate things, and so we must be on guard against idolatry in our lives.³⁰ We may not go down into our basement and carve something out of wood and worship it. **But trust me, we've got idols. We've got things in our lives that we value more than the God of the universe and we wittingly or unwittingly worship as more significant, more important, or more meaningful to our lives than God.**

That's why Paul tells us in **1 Corinthians 10:4**, "...flee from idolatry." He wasn't talking to unbelievers there. He was talking to Christians! And in **Colossians 3:5**, Paul says "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." That's why the Apostle John says at the end of his letter to Christians in **1 John 5:21**, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols."³¹

Idolatry should grieve us. But also, it should provoke us into action. "What action, Pastor Tony?" Well, what does Paul do? Look at verse 17. He starts telling people about Jesus.

¹⁷ So he reasoned³² in the synagogue with the Jews³³ and the devout persons,³⁴ and in the marketplace³⁵ every day³⁶ with those who happened to be there.

So Paul gets to work. He starts preaching Christ in the synagogue among the Jews and God-fearers. But he also goes to the marketplace, where the hustle and bustle of society takes place. And as he does this, look at **verse 18**.

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"³⁷—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.³⁸

That word "babbler," by the way, is a derogatory insult. The Greek word means "seed-speaker" or "seed-picker."³⁹ It has the idea of someone who picks up scraps of knowledge and ideas from other people and

²⁹ John Calvin and Henry Beveridge, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 413.

³⁰ See the article entitled, "Idolatry Defined," 09-14-12: <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/idolatry-defined/>

³¹ For more on this, see Pastor Tony's sermon on 1 John 5:21 entitled "Idols": <https://www.messiahbible.org/1-john-5-21-keeping-yourself-from-the-idols>.

³² Sproul, *Acts*, 306–7: "Paul reasoned. He was not simply Paul the missionary or Paul the preacher, but Paul the chief apologist of the Christian church. He went to the heart of the intellectual center of the ancient world to reason with its people about ultimate truth."

³³ Clinton E. Arnold, *Acts*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, vol. 2B, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 169–70: "Many Jewish burial inscriptions have been discovered in Athens that attest to the Jewish presence. They range in date from the second century B.C. to the third century A.D., but a high proportion of them date to the first century A.D."

³⁴ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 561: "As is Paul's custom, he takes his message to the synagogues and to the pious (σεβομένους, *sebomenois*). Luke uses this term often in Acts (13:43, 50; 16:14; 17:4; 18:7, 13; 19:27), generally regarding God-fearers."

³⁵ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 723: "Paul's discussions with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers presumably took place in the Stoa Poikile, the 'Painted Stoa' built in the 470s BC, which displayed painted scenes of Athens's military exploits as well as mementos of Athenian victories, including bronze shields of fallen warriors. It also contained an altar and seats... [it was] a popular meeting place, and those whose trade required a large crowd or audience were to be found there on a daily basis: jugglers, sword-swallowers, beggars, and fishmongers are all specifically attested to."

³⁶ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 365: "In the synagogue, Paul reasoned with those who were born as Jews and with the proselytes of the gate. He also reasoned in the marketplace or the *agora*, which was the open space in the heart of the city where business, both judicial and commercial, was transacted... Paul went to this place daily and witnessed to anyone who happened to pass by and would talk to him."

³⁷ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 367: "The Greek term for 'gods,' *daimoniōn*, is the New Testament word for demons. However, the Greeks used the term of any deity, both good and bad, and that is how *daimoniōn* is used in this context. Hence, Paul was accused of propagating the existence of some foreign deities."

³⁸ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 474: "From the time of Chrysostom interpreters have suggested that some Athenians thought Paul was proclaiming two gods: Jesus and Anastasis (*anastasis* means 'resurrection'; v. 18b). This is typical of how people with a different worldview misunderstand us as we proclaim the gospel." Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 367: "The Greek word for 'resurrection' is *anastasis*. Some scholars suggest that Paul's audience thought Anastasis was a goddess, which means they personified this abstract noun."

³⁹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 561–2: "This term literally refers to birds that pick up seeds, and so it often means 'scavenger' or 'scrapmonger' ... the term has the connotation of a person who picks up bits of information and passes them off as if he knows what he is talking about." Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 367: "They used a colorful word (*spermologos*), 'seed-speaker,' which evoked images of a bird pecking indiscriminately at seeds in a barnyard."

pawns them off as their own. So these Epicurean and Stoic philosophers condescendingly communicate with Paul. And *some* dismissively say, “What does this babblers wish to say?” Others on the other hand assume “He’s preaching about foreign divinities.” In other words, these Greeks are absolutely clueless about what Paul is preaching. They’re lost. And Paul’s a long way from Jerusalem.

Now let me tell you a little bit about Epicurean and Stoic philosophy. I told you that Athens wasn’t a great political and military power at this time. But it was an intellectual power. And philosophy and philosophers were prevalent. Epicurean philosophers, for instance, built an intellectual system that tried to minimize pain in society and maximize pleasure. They were ancient hedonists.⁴⁰

The Stoic philosophers, on the other hand, were essentially Greek moralists.⁴¹ They lived disciplined, austere, dispassionate lives. Instead of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain, they tried to cultivate an indifference to both pain and pleasure, so that a person feels nothing. We use the word *stoic* today to describe someone who lacks affection and emotion. And that was part of the Stoic belief system.⁴²

Now needless to say, both of these systems were in conflict with Judaism and Christianity.⁴³ Both of these philosophical systems were polytheistic and therefore pagan. The Stoics did believe in life after death. They believed, similar to Buddhism, that we are simply absorbed into a higher existence. The Epicureans, on the other hand, didn’t believe in life after death. So for both of these groups, Paul’s preaching was totally foreign. **“One God? One Savior, Jesus Christ? Jesus, the Son of God, resurrected from the dead? Salvation and resurrection for us who believe in Christ?”**⁴⁴ This was mind-blowing for these individuals. And so Paul’s approach to this group has to be different than the way he approached the Jews in the synagogues.

The Jews in the synagogue at least knew about Yahweh, and they feared Yahweh. The Jews in the synagogue had anticipated a Messiah. These Greek pagans don’t know anything about Yahweh or a Messiah, so Paul has to start from square one.

And by the way, I think this is helpful for us, because we live in the crossroads of a post-Christian society in America. Some people have recollections of the truth because they grew up in church, or they saw Billy Graham on TV, or whatever. But others have never heard about Jesus. And because of immigration, we have people coming to the States from Buddhist countries and Hindu countries and Muslim countries. And so we need to be sensitive to where we should start. For some, we need to start at Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the world.” For others, who assume that already, we can start in the NT with John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word” (Jesus), and the Word was God!

⁴⁰ Sproul, *Acts*, 308: “The Epicureans developed the philosophy that we call *hedonism*. We apply the term *epicurean* to gourmets who like the finest food and wines. The philosophy of hedonism defines truth this way: truth is found in the achieving of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. In simple terms the creed was, ‘If it feels good, it is good.’”

⁴¹ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 367: “Seneca was one of the famous Roman Stoics, as were Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius.”

⁴² Sproul, *Acts*, 308–9: “The Stoics, on the other hand, believed that everything in this world happens according to fixed mechanistic causes. There is no such thing as human freedom except at a very limited point. They believed man has no power to influence his life—*que sera, sera*, ‘what will be will be.’ However, man can control his attitude about what happens. He can be bitter or discouraged or defeated by what life throws his way, or he can develop the philosophical attitude of imperturbability, or what they called *philosophical ataraxia*. Today that word is the name given to a form of Valium. *Philosophical ataraxia* means that nothing gets you down. You keep a stiff upper lip and remain cool no matter what happens. Life is meaningless, but don’t let it get you down. That is the ultimate skepticism of stoicism, which is slightly warmed over in the nihilism of a Nietzsche, a Camus, or a Sartre in our day.”

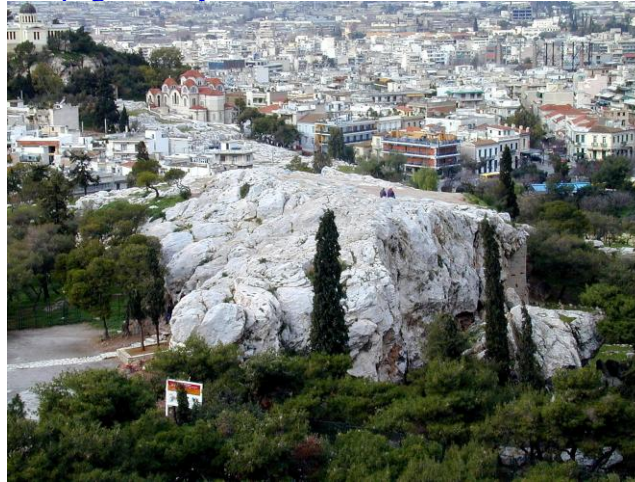
⁴³ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 67: “The Epicureans tended to see life as a matter of open chance, while the Stoics viewed the world through a lens of fatalism.”

⁴⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 367: “Epicureans did not believe in any existence after death, and Stoics believed that only the soul, the divine spark, survived death. So what was this idea of a bodily resurrection (*anastasis*)? ‘He must be speaking of a new goddess named resurrection (‘Anastasia’) along with this new god Jesus he keeps talking about’ (author’s paraphrase). How ironical that they were making Paul into a polytheist like themselves.”

Now watch what Paul does here. He contextualizes his message for the audience. He communicates the truth to them on their level, where they can understand it and respond.⁴⁵

¹⁹ And they took him [that's the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, they took Paul] and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know⁴⁶ 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."

Here's a picture of the Areopagus today which means "Rock of Ares."⁴⁷



Areopagus (Mars Hill)⁴⁸

The Romans called this place "Mars Hill."⁴⁹ From this vantage point you could look out on the entire cityscape of Athens and see all of the architectural wonders of the city. This was a place in Athens where philosophers philosophized. It was a place where the intellectually elite of society mused and pontificated great ideas. It was an ivory tower. It was a think-tank. That's where they took Paul.

And Luke says in **verse 21**,

²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.⁵⁰

I think this was a bit of a slam by Luke on the Athenians.⁵¹ In other words, he says instead of getting a job and doing something productive, these guys just like to talk about the latest philosophical fads.⁵² And so

⁴⁵ CHRYSOSTOM: "He rushed to the altar and defeated them with the weapons of the enemies themselves. And that was what he said, 'I became everything to everyone: to the Jews a Jew, to those outside the law as if I were outside the law' [1 Cor 9:19–21]." Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 218.

⁴⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 728: "He was being investigated concerning the foreign gods that he seems to be introducing to the population, an endeavor for which he may need official permission (but which they may refuse to grant). Both the first and the second verbal phrase with which the speaker of the council describes their request (δυνάμεθα γνῶναι; 'may we know' v. 19; and βουλόμεθα γνῶναι; 'we would like to know' v. 20) express a polite, but certainly forceful request for information and explanation."

⁴⁷ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 131–2: "The Areopagus was a court, so named for the hill on which it had once met. The power of that tribunal had fluctuated over the centuries but in Roman times was considerable. (Athens was a free city in the Roman Empire, with the right of self-government.) Paul was not formally tried before this court (which several centuries earlier had condemned Socrates), but he was informally required to give an account of his teaching."

⁴⁸ This picture is part of "The Museum Collection" of Todd Bolen and A.D. Riddle. Used here with permission.

⁴⁹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 563: "The locale's Latin name was Mars Hill. A plaque marks the traditional site today, which can almost be missed, located just to the side of and under the Acropolis, which bears the towering Parthenon on the vast area that served as a major forum for Athens. It was a location at the hub of the city's activity."

⁵⁰ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 728: "Luke's comment on the Athenians' quest for new things is a parenthetical remark to his readers (rare in Acts)."

⁵¹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 563: "Luke is having some fun here, as he portrays the intellectual Athenians as the 'seed pickers' they suggested Paul was." Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 369: "Their love for novel ideas was proverbial. Perhaps the most telling quip was that of Demosthenes, who remarked how the Athenians were going about the city asking for the latest news at the very moment when the armies of Philip of Macedon were knocking at their door. Luke's remark is quite ironical. The Athenians had accused Paul of being

here comes Paul talking about this “new god” Jesus, and his resurrection. **“Hey, that’s cool. That’s new. Let’s hear what he has to say.”**

²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said:

Now I can only imagine how intimidating this must have been for Paul. Here he is at this prominent place in the city. He rises to his feet in front of the city’s leading intellectuals. All around him, he is surrounded by breathtaking architecture, grand edifices, and a myriad of gold, silver, and marble idols. **Would you be intimidated in that setting? I would be.**

Paul has just gained a hearing with the smartest people in the city on the city’s biggest stage. What’s he going to do? Well, he’s going to do the same thing he’s been doing everywhere else he’s gone. He’s going to preach the gospel. Except, he’s going to do it a little differently than he might with a room full of Jews.

“Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.”⁵³

Okay, that’s one way to describe them.⁵⁴ This is what’s referred to as a *captatio benevolentiae*. It’s an effort to win the favor of one’s hearers and thus secure their attention.⁵⁵ Paul’s got some tough things to communicate to this audience.⁵⁶ But before he does that, he says something to build a bridge to them.⁵⁷

And this continues in **verse 23**.

²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects⁵⁸ of your worship,

Now notice how Paul is communicating. We know that these “objects of your worship” have grieved Paul’s heart. Right? So I find it insightful that Paul doesn’t start by saying, **“Your idols are an abomination.”** Paul’s statement here at first borders on a compliment. “I perceive that in every way you are religious.” And then he talks about the objects of their worship.

I think there’s a principle here for us. It’s important for us, when we interact with unbelievers, to establish common ground and build rapport with an audience. Some might see this as disingenuous, but I don’t see it that way. Paul’s affirming the kernel of truth in this culture (“you’re very religious”).⁵⁹

And to that you might say, **“Where’s the smack-down, Paul? When are you going to tell these pagans to repent?”** Well trust me, that’s coming in just a moment. But before he does that, he’s got to earn a hearing.

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.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.⁶⁰

the dilettante (v. 18), an accusation much more pertinent to themselves. Their curiosity had a beneficial side, however. It set the stage for Paul’s witness.”

⁵² BASIL THE GREAT: “The leisure of the Athenians was evil, since ‘they devoted their leisure to nothing more than saying or listening to something new.’” Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 216.

⁵³ The KJV’s “too superstitious” is too interpretive.

⁵⁴ Sproul, *Acts*, 311: “Modern sociology and anthropology have found that man is incurably religious, *homo religiosus*. No matter where we go, we find people practicing religion, most of which is animistic and idolatrous. Yet when scholars go into these primitive places and begin to probe, people will talk about the big God who lives on the other side of the mountain. They cannot erase from their consciousness the knowledge of the Most High God. That was as true in Athens as it is among the aborigines today.”

⁵⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 370.

⁵⁶ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 27: “Paul was undoubtedly eager to protest their idolatry and point them to the truth, but he restrained himself and gave a genuine compliment first. He met them where they were.”

⁵⁷ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 72: “Christians today need to observe the world around them and see the truths of God embedded within their culture and society. All humanity, even though lost in sin, bears the image of God. People’s actions, motives, ethics, and desires in some way will point to the God who made them and who longs to redeem them. Find that common ground and use it to share the gospel.”

⁵⁸ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 69: “Paul depersonalized their worship by not calling the objects of their worship ‘gods’ but referring to them as ‘objects,’ because they were no deities at all.”

⁵⁹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 729n1088: “Josephus calls the Athenians ‘the most pious (εὐσεβεστάτους) of the Greeks’ (*Ag. Ap.* 2.130). Pausanias writes in the second century, ‘and they are conspicuous not only for their humanity but also for their devotion to religion (θεοὺς εὐσεβοῦσιν)’ (1.17.1).”

⁶⁰ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 564: “Paul is not equating the god worshiped here by the Greeks and the God he will preach, but the altar is a segue into discussing the one true God.”

Do you see what Paul is doing here? Do you see how shrewdly he uses what they know to explain to them what they don't know? **"I see that you have an 'unknown god.' Let me tell you about him!"**

By the way, it was common for Roman cities to have an idol for the "unknown god," because it helped them cover their basis.⁶¹ **"I think we got all the gods. But just in case we missed one, here's an idol for an 'unknown god.' Whew! Glad we took care of that."** This was a culture that was enslaved by their belief system. **This was not the freedom that we have in Christ.**

Now watch what Paul does next. He's going to dispense with the preliminary pleasantries, and get down to business. So far, he hasn't said anything objectionable to this crowd. But watch this. Look at **verse 24**.

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,⁶² nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything,⁶³ since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.*

Now who is Paul describing here? Yahweh, right? The God of the OT. The one true God of the universe. But notice he's not using OT quotations like he did in the synagogues.⁶⁴ This crowd doesn't have the OT Scriptures as a reference point.⁶⁵ Instead Paul summarizes Biblical truth and also uses general revelation to contextualize his message.⁶⁶

Verse 26.

²⁶ *And he [that's God] made from one man [that's Adam]⁶⁷ every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth,*

In other words, there's one God. And all people everywhere derived from him and also from the same forefather, Adam.⁶⁸ This would have been received as an insult by the Greeks, because they viewed anyone who was non-Greek as a barbarian.⁶⁹ They, like most people in the ancient world, were ethnocentric.

having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place,⁷⁰ that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel⁷⁰ their way toward him and find him.⁷¹ Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,⁷²

⁶¹ CHRYSOSTOM: "They erected an altar and inscribed it with the words 'to an unknown god' in order to signify through the inscription: If by any chance there is another god who is still unknown to us, we will worship him too." Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 217.

⁶² Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 371: "He does not dwell in temples made with hands, like the Parthenon in Athens."

⁶³ Isaiah 66:1–2 is an OT text that parallels what Paul says here. But he doesn't quote it verbatim: "Thus says the Lord: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.'"

⁶⁴ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 70: "Paul, in the midst of his gospel proclamation, does something astounding. First, recognize that he has not, at any point, mentioned Jesus Christ or the Messiah. He has not quoted the Old Testament or, as he so often did, reasoned from the Scriptures that the Messiah has come. Paul knew his audience. Consequently, he contextualized his gospel presentation. Paul's missiology does not hold to a rigid format and style of communication for the gospel."

⁶⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 370: "The gist of the speech is, however, thoroughly rooted in Old Testament thought throughout. The main theme is God as Creator and the proper worship of this Creator God. The language often has the ring of Greek philosophy, for Paul was attempting to build what bridges he could to reach the Athenian intellectuals. The underlying thought remains thoroughly biblical." Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 476: "Paul's strategy of reasoning for the gospel with the Athenians is instructive. His message does not contain direct quotations or appeals to the Old Testament as did his talks to Jews and God-fearers. Such appeals would have meant nothing to hearers who did not accept the authority of the Scriptures. But in spite of that, the message was thoroughly scriptural."

⁶⁶ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 559: "The speech shows how Christianity encountered paganism. It starts with natural theology, or revealed theology, and then moves to God's plan."

⁶⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 734: "Without specifically referring to Adam or citing Gen 1:27–28 or 2:7, Paul clearly alludes to the biblical creation account (cf. Rom 5:12): God created all the nations of the earth from one man, Adam, the father of all human beings."

⁶⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 734: "There is no parallel for the notion of one ancestor of the entire human race in Greek or Roman mythology."

⁶⁹ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 140: "That statement was a blow to the national pride of the Greeks, who scornfully referred to non-Greeks as 'barbarians.'"

⁷⁰ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 566: "If they seek God, they just might find him. The two verbs for seeking, 'groping' (ψηλαφήσειαν, *psēlaphēseian*) and 'find' (εὕροισεν, *heuroien*), are optative, expressing a possibility of finding God."

⁷¹ JOHN CALVIN: "Paul now warns the Athenians of the purpose for which the human race was created, so that in this way he may invite and encourage them to consider the purpose of their own life. It is certainly shameful ingratitude on the part of human beings, when all enjoy a common life, not to consider why God has given them life. But still this brute-like stupidity has the majority in its

God created us. God created all human beings. We are all related. And we all can have equal access to God. God is not a tribal deity. God is not a territorial deity of Israel. Salvation is here and anyone and everyone regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender can have a relationship with him.

²⁸ for “ ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “ ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’

Now get this. Paul quotes from two pagan sources here and not from Scripture.⁷³ First, he quotes from a seventh century B.C. philosopher named Epimenides of Crete, “In him we live and move and have our being.” And then he quotes from a guy named Aratus, a third century B.C. philosopher, who basically said that we are all the offspring of “Zeus.”⁷⁴ **This would be like me quoting Albert Einstein or Ernest Hemingway or Mark Twain to substantiate the gospel.**

It's amazing to me how Paul can hold his own with these intellectual elites in Athens. Paul knew his stuff. And Paul knew their stuff too. He knew it well enough to use it against them!⁷⁵

Look at **verse 29**.

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 man.⁷⁶ ³⁰ The times of ignorance⁷⁷ God overlooked,⁷⁸ but now he commands all people⁷⁹ everywhere to repent,⁸⁰

Repent of what? Repent of worshipping idols.⁸¹ Repent of making gods in their own image, when God made them in his image.⁸²

grip, so that they do not reflect upon why they are placed in the world, and they do not give a thought to the Creator of heaven and earth, with whose good things they gorge themselves.” Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 247.

⁷² Psalm 145:18–20 is an OT text that parallels what Paul says here. But again he doesn't quote it verbatim: “The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them. The Lord preserves all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.”

⁷³ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 484: “If the Bible agrees with something that another religion teaches, we do not need to be afraid about affirming it. But if Scripture disagrees, we must respectfully say so and seek to show why it is wrong, as Paul did in Athens.”

⁷⁴ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 71: “The lines Paul quotes would have likely been written about Zeus, the primary pagan god of Greek mythology. Paul borrows from the Athenian culture and utilizes the gems of truth embedded even within their pagan lore.”

⁷⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 377: “Commentators often have said that the Paul of the epistles would never have preached the Areopagus sermon because its thought would have been alien to him. Such is not the case. The appeal to a ‘natural revelation’ is certainly present in Rom 1:18–32 even though the application differs. More significant are passages like 1 Thess 1:9–10, where Paul summarized his preaching to the Gentiles at Thessalonica. There the elements are strikingly the same as in the Areopagus speech: turning from idols to a living God, the return of the Son from heaven, the resurrection, the wrath to come. This is almost a summary of the appeal in Acts 17:29–31.”

⁷⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 738: “Paul's reference to cult images ‘carved with human skill and imagination’ would have prompted the members of the Areopagus Council to think in particular of the most famous statue of the city, the 12 meter (40 feet) high gold-ivory statue of Athena Parthenos by Phidias, made between 447–439 BC of gold from the Athenian state treasury, understood as ‘a self-representation of Athens.’”

⁷⁷ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 569: “To charge the Athenians with ignorance is a bold move and critique, given their intellectual history.”

⁷⁸ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 72: “Paul does not mean that God overlooked sin as if it did not happen or with a sense of neutrality. Sin had not gone unnoticed by God. This verse means that God, by his mercy, had not brought down his wrath or judgment upon these philosophers ... yet.”

⁷⁹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 748: “Some object that Paul's audience in Athens has just heard the gospel and that the situation of people who have never heard the gospel is a different case. While correct, this reasoning leads to the absurd conclusion that it would have been better had Paul not mentioned Jesus: if people who have never heard of Jesus are not responsible for their unredeemed status, providing them with a valid defense on the day of judgment, Paul's preaching puts them in a dangerous situation, since it would be preferable if the listeners remain ignorant. While the question concerning the fate of people who have never heard the gospel may remain intriguing from a theoretical point of view, the church has been commissioned by the crucified and risen Lord to bear witness to the reality of God's saving revelation in Jesus, Israel's Messiah, among all nations, which include the Athenians.”

⁸⁰ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 569: “It appears that Paul is saying that God did little to remedy the direction of the nations as a whole in the past (besides issuing prophetic warnings and calling Israel to be a light to the nations). Acts 14:16 says that God let them go their own way. He largely ignored them. Now, however, God has acted. God calls to all people everywhere to repent. The call to repent matches Acts 14:15 with its call to turn from idols.”

⁸¹ Sproul, *Acts*, 317–8: “When God commands us to do something, it is not an invitation. It is a divine subpoena. It is every human's duty to come to Jesus and bow before the King of kings. Those who refuse will receive the everlasting judgment of Almighty God. God does not give us the right to choose what religion we want to follow. The United States government may give you that right, but God does not. He commands all men 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;

Who's that "man"? Do you know? Paul says in **2 Timothy**, "I charge you in the presence of God and of Jesus Christ who is to judge the living and the dead..." (**4:1**).⁸³ he [God the Father] will judge the world in righteousness by a man [Jesus] whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising [Jesus] from the dead."⁸⁴

Write this down as #2 in your notes. False religions should grieve us and provoke us into action.

But also...

2) False religions should **motivate** us to proclaim **truth** (Acts 17:19–31)⁸⁵

Our grief should provoke us into action. And the Holy Spirit inside of us should provoke us to speak truth.⁸⁶ **When we see people in bondage... when we see people enslaved by false gods and worthless idols and meaningless pursuits... we should be compelled to say, "There's something better for you! There's a God who created you! There's a God who loves you! And he gave his Son for you so that you can have life! And you can have freedom in Christ. And you can have eternity!"**⁸⁷ **False beliefs and false religions should motivate us to proclaim truth.**⁸⁸

Now what are the truths that we need to convey in our gospel conversations? I'll give you a few things that I see from the text.

1) *One Almighty God created everything (Creation Ex-Nihilo)*

Paul says, "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man" (**17:24**). **God made everything out of nothing.** "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (**Gen 1:1**). **Nothing that was created in this world originated from anything other than the One Almighty God of the Universe.**

⁸² Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 71: "Since we are made by God, in his image, we must not think that we can create an image and call it God." Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 737: "Since human beings have been brought into existence by God, human beings cannot bring a god into existence by their 'skill' (τέχνη) and 'imagination' (ἐνθυμήσις)."

⁸³ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 570: "The idea of a righteous judgment runs through the Bible (Pss. 9:8; 67:4; 96:13; 98:9; Amos 5:18; Isa. 2:12; Rom. 2:5, 16; 1 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:6, 10; 1 Thess. 5:2, 4; 2 Thess. 1:10; 2:2; 2 Tim. 1:18; Heb. 6:11; 2 Pet. 3:10)."

⁸⁴ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 373: "In verse 31, Paul presented the reason: God is the Judge of all men. He has appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness. This day is the day of the Great White Throne Judgment. At this judgment, God will judge all unsaved humanity in righteousness, which will be the standard of judgment."

⁸⁵ Sproul, *Acts*, 317: "His speech answered the three biggest questions they struggled with—life, motion, and being. The God who made them does not dwell in temples made with hands. He cannot be reduced to ivory, silver, gold, or wood. In this God, man lives and moves and has his being. It is in the biblical God that we find the answer of the one and the many. We find the answer to ultimate reality. All the philosophical problems that vex us find their solution ultimately in the being and character of God, and any attempt to explain reality apart from that ends in manifest and manifold ignorance, the shadows on Plato's cave."

⁸⁶ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 573: "Another important observation is that despite being aggravated by all the idolatry he sees around him in Athens, Paul manages to share the gospel with a generous but honest spirit. The Paul of Rom. 1 who speaks of the sad state of society is still able to love and connect with that society in Acts 17. This also is an important lesson; sometimes we Christians are so angry at the state of our society that all that comes through is the anger and not the love we are to have for our neighbor in need. Those who see this anger and want to represent the faith differently can overreact the other way, almost pretending as if there is no idolatry as long as the religious search is sincerely motivated. Paul avoids both of these extremes. He knows how to confront but does so honestly and graciously. Both message and tone are important in sharing the gospel. Here Paul is an example of both."

⁸⁷ I disagree with Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 715 who says, "The speech as such is not a missionary sermon seeking to lead the members of the venerated Areopagus Council to faith in Jesus. Rather, it is a civic speech which seeks to dispel the suggestion of the Athenian officials that his religious teaching requires an action of the Council."

⁸⁸ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 487: "It is vital to lay the foundation of who God is early in our gospel presentation to those who do not have a biblical worldview. How can people realize the need for a Savior from sin unless they realize the seriousness of sin and its consequences? And how can they realize the seriousness of sin unless they know about the holy God against whom our sin is committed? How can they appreciate what Christ did for them unless they understand God's horror over sin and the price he paid to redeem us? Why should they go through the hassle of changing religions unless they realize that to turn to God is to turn to the supreme Creator and Lord of the universe?"

Some people might say, **“That’s so simple, Tony. Who doesn’t know that?”** If everyone knows that then why do we construct these convoluted evolutionary systems that try to remove Almighty God from the equation.⁸⁹ I think more than ever we need to emphasize this “basic” truth.⁹⁰

2) *God is the Uncaused Causer (The Cosmological Argument)*⁹¹

Here’s a basic premise for Christian apologetics. Even the great philosophers of ancient Greece, Plato and Aristotle, believed in an “unmoved mover” or an “uncaused causer.” The argument goes like this 1) Every finite and contingent being has a cause and 2) A causal loop cannot exist. 3) Therefore, a First Cause (or something that is not an effect) must exist, the uncaused causer. And what Paul is saying to this crowd of Greek intellectuals is that the “unknown God” that they worship, he is the uncaused causer. He is the **unmoved mover who “gives to all mankind life and breath” (17:24) and “made from one man every nation of mankind” (17:25) and “having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place” (17:26).** Again you might think this is pretty basic stuff, but this is exactly the kind of stuff that evolutionary theory tries to circumvent.⁹²

3) *There is an Intelligent Designer and life has purpose (The Teleological Argument)*

Every design has a designer, right? Every building has a builder, right? Every construction has a constructor. Every program has a programmer. So who would look out on the intricately designed and constructed world that we inhabit and say that it all happened by chance? **“Something blew up and all of this just kind of randomly came together!”** Really? Not according to Paul’s sermon here.

And not only does Paul argue for an intelligent Creator, he argues for purpose in his creation.⁹³ **“You are God’s offspring.” “You were made in his image.” “In him you live and move and have your being.” “You were made to seek him and find him.”** Why would you worship gods made of gold, silver, and stone? God made you in his image. You don’t make God in your image!

4) *God took on human flesh, died, and was raised from the dead (Incarnation, Atonement, and Resurrection)*

This is the place where the Greeks started to object. They objected in **verse 18** when Paul mentioned resurrection. They called him a “babblers” or a “seed-picker.” They object again in **verse 32**, “When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked.” I don’t think that the “incarnation” would have been that big an obstacle for these Greeks. They believed themselves in “gods that took the form of man.” It’s the atonement that they struggled with, and the resurrection.

5) *Repentance and faith in Christ secures our future resurrection*

Paul writes, “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 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” **(17:30–31).**

6) *Christ is returning to judge the living and the dead*

⁸⁹ Sproul, *Acts*, 314–5: “Children in the public schools are taught routinely, almost daily, that their life is the result of a cosmic accident, that human life emerged fortuitously through the chance collision of atoms and is moving relentlessly towards the abyss of nothingness at the end. The two poles of our existence start and end in meaninglessness; this is the grand folly of humanism, which philosophy I say does not deserve an intelligent response; it basically deserves nothing but ridicule. Humanists, who steal their capital from Christianity, tell us that we are creatures of great dignity, and yet they say our origin and destiny are in meaninglessness.”

⁹⁰ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 481: “Paul’s practice, followed in Lystra and Athens, of beginning his exposition of the gospel by introducing God (14:15–17; 17:24–29) must surely become standard procedure when we preach the gospel to people without a biblical worldview. It is so important to establish the fact of God before we share the message of Christ.”

⁹¹ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 133: “The law of cause and effect argues for God’s existence. Common sense dictates that every effect must have a cause. Yet there cannot be an endless chain of such causes. Therefore, there must be an uncaused first cause. Theologians refer to that line of reasoning as the cosmological argument.”

⁹² Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 70: “Paul guards and announces the historicity of Adam. Many Christians today willingly surrender the doctrine of creation to supposedly irrefutable scientific evidence. For Paul, however, the doctrine of creation, and God’s sovereign hand in the act of creation, remains a central pillar of the entire gospel message.”

⁹³ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 129: “Man is not a cosmic accident, a personal being trapped in an impersonal universe. There is a God, who is both the creator of the universe and its sovereign ruler. Not only does He exist, but He is also knowable and has revealed Himself to man.”

That's a list of core Christian ideas that I identified in Paul's message.⁹⁴ Maybe sometimes you can assume some of these things with your audience when your sharing Christ. Other times you can't.⁹⁵

Let me ask you a question in light of this passage—how would you lead a person to Christ? How would you lead a person to Christ who had a Christian or Jewish background? And how would that change if you were sharing Christ with someone from a religious background who had no knowledge of the Bible at all? When do you need to go back to Genesis to share Christ? When can you fast-forward to the NT? When might you share your testimony of how God changed your life?⁹⁶ Add some tools to your “evangelism and apologetics toolbox.”⁹⁷

Now look at verse 32. What happens after Paul shares the gospel on Mars Hill?

³² *Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead,⁹⁸ some mocked.*

They mocked Paul. Does that happen sometimes when we communicate truth to other people? You better believe it does.⁹⁹ And if you're not willing to become the aroma of death to some, you won't have opportunities to become the aroma of life to others.

A lot of times when people get a whiff of that aroma-of-death smell, it's easier for them to laugh it off or mock the messenger than seriously consider the implications of the gospel.

Write this down as #3 in your notes. False religions should grieve us and provoke us into action. False religions should motivate us to proclaim truth. And finally,

⁹⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 748: “Authentic evangelism never emphasizes only points of agreement with the audience, but also expresses disagreement and contradiction.”

⁹⁵ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 479–80: “While Paul may have agreed with features in other faiths, he did not agree with their overall systems. If Christianity and other religions are represented by circles, the centers of the circles are distant and the points of intersection are only on peripheral matters. For example, there is much admirable material in the ethical discipline of Buddhism with which we can agree and which we can use as stepping-stones in sharing the gospel. But we must remember that these good features can be used by Satan to keep people from the truth. By finding satisfaction in trying to earn their own salvation, Buddhists can assuage the conviction of sin and guilt and of their need for a Savior and thus resist the invitation to respond to God's gracious offer of salvation.”

⁹⁶ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 487–8: “As we take the gospel out today, we will encounter a wide variety of erroneous understandings of God. Secular humanists think that the idea of God is a crutch, perhaps needed by weak people, but not by self-made people like themselves. Atheists and scientific materialists claim that science has proved that there is no God and that the existence of the world can be accounted for without bringing God into the equation. Many Buddhists think of the gods as inferior to the Buddha, perhaps needed to perform small favors but certainly not worthy of the position of Lord of their lives. Animists and polytheists see several gods responsible for different aspects of life, who can be appeased by following magic-like formulas. Many Buddhists and Hindus, and even some Roman Catholics, have given God-like status to images of their gods or to holy men. Muslims see God as so transcendent and distant from humanity that we can only be slaves, depending on his mercy, not children basking in his love. Pantheistic Hindus and New Age adherents see God as being in everything, including oneself... The above list of misconceptions about God shows us again that we have much homework to do to ensure that in sharing the gospel we build our message on the right foundation. The seriousness of our evangelistic task and the need to dedicate ourselves to it with all our energies and creative powers are themes seen throughout the book of Acts. Paul's ministry in Athens is particularly vivid in presenting us with these challenges.”

⁹⁷ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 71–2: “Paul's strategy provides Christians with valuable lessons on evangelism and missions. Christians cannot surrender the theological and doctrinal core of the gospel. Without true doctrine, we have no good news to proclaim. At the same time, Paul shows that we can maintain the truth of the gospel, while packaging our message to meet the needs of a particular audience. A sermon that preaches the gospel to a country church in the middle of the American South will bear little resemblance to a talk that preaches the Scriptures in Zimbabwe. Though both preachers proclaim the same gospel, they do so within their own cultural contexts and according to their customs. They contextualize the message so that the gospel breaks into that specific culture and worldview.”

⁹⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 742: “The concept of a bodily resurrection from the dead—implied in Paul's reference to Jesus as the judge in God's day of judgment—was alien to the Greeks, who believed in the immortality of the soul. Only a small number of the thousands of epigraphs that survive from antiquity express a hope in an afterlife, usually expressed in terms of the immortality of the soul, which lives in the heavens or is identified with the stars. The most widely held opinion concerning the afterlife was that ‘death is nothingness, eternal sleep.’ People often joked about annihilation at death: many wrote the letters *n.f.n.s.n.c* on their gravestones, an abbreviation for the phrase *non fui, non sum, non curo* (‘I was not, I am not, I care not’).”

⁹⁹ JOHN CALVIN: “Surely it is no wonder that this part of Paul's speech was scoffed at in Athens. For it is a mystery hidden from human minds, a mystery about which not an inkling ever entered the heads of even the greatest philosophers. And it can only be grasped by us when we lift up eyes of faith to the immense power of God.” Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 248.

3) False religions should **compel** us to press on despite **derision** (Acts 16:32–34)

For these Greeks, this concept of bodily resurrection was especially hard to accept.¹⁰⁰ Many Greeks superstitiously believed that all matter was inherently evil. It's what's referred to as dualism. The material world was inherently evil, and the immaterial world (represented by the soul) was inherently good. So if there was an afterlife, then humans would just be these disembodied spirits floating around in the netherworld. Or they would be absorbed into a higher existence.¹⁰¹

But that's not what the Bible teaches, and that's not what Paul preached. He preached that our bodies would be raised from the dead incorruptible (see **1 Cor 15**). Christ's resurrection was that way. His resurrection was the first-fruits of our resurrection. And so when these Athenian intellectuals heard about bodily resurrection, they scoffed at Paul.

Not everyone though.¹⁰² Look at **verse 32**.

[S]ome mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." ³³ So Paul went out from their midst.

But look at this. This makes it all worthwhile in **verse 34**.¹⁰³

³⁴ *But some men joined him and believed,*

This word "joined" (Greek: κολλάω) has the idea of "binding closely" and "uniting" with Paul.¹⁰⁴ In other words they forsook their false belief system and **hitched their wagon to Christ and the church**.¹⁰⁵ There's no such thing as Christian syncretism. Not in the Bible anyway.

among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite¹⁰⁶ and a woman named Damaris¹⁰⁷ and others with them.

We never hear about these two people ever again. But they must have been saints that Luke and the early church were familiar with. They became prominent in the church. People knew their names. And Paul keeps preaching the gospel. Paul keeps facing opposition. In this case it was verbal abuse instead of physical abuse. They hurled insults at him instead of stones. But Paul keeps pressing on and preaching the gospel.

Now let me ask you this question. Is Christ important enough to you that you would be willing to be mocked for your faith? Is he? I'm going to go out on a limb and say that most of the people in this

¹⁰⁰ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 67: "Greek philosophy venerated the spiritual realm and saw the spiritual world as something that could only be seen after one had cut oneself off from the physical world. Thus, for Paul to preach a resurrection from the dead did not seem like good news at all."

¹⁰¹ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 27: "Mankind is not moving toward extinction (as the Epicureans thought), nor toward absorption in the cosmos (as the Stoics supposed). But mankind is moving toward divine judgment... Five hundred years earlier Aeschylus had written, 'When the dust has soaked up a man's blood, once he is dead, there is no resurrection,' and this was a popular Greek sentiment in Paul's day."

¹⁰² Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 73: "This chapter concludes with three different responses to the gospel message. Paul met mockery, interest, and conversions. Likewise, Christians today will meet similar responses."

¹⁰³ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 379: "The well-worn sermon idea that Paul totally abandoned his efforts to preach to intellectuals after his experience in Athens is a misreading of both Acts and 1 Corinthians. Luke did not present Paul's Areopagus sermon as a failure. The Areopagus council consisted of about thirty members according to the best evidence. If Dionysius were the only convert from the address, one out of thirty is scarcely negligible, particularly when addressing skeptical intellectuals."

¹⁰⁴ See BDAG, κολλάω ①, 555.

¹⁰⁵ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 743: "The fact that Paul describes the Corinthian believer Stephanas and his household as 'the first converts in Achaia' (1 Cor 16:15) does not prove that the first conversions in Achaia happened in Corinth and that Luke's comment in v. 34 is therefore erroneous as Paul's missionary work in Athens was evidently unsuccessful. The description of Stephanas and his family as 'first converts' (lit., 'firstfruits') in Achaia can be understood in several ways. The first church in Achaia was established in Corinth, while the conversion of several individuals in Athens did not lead to the foundation of a church; the term 'Achaia' in 1 Cor 16:15 describes Corinth as capital of Achaia; the term 'firstfruits' (ἀπαρχή) in 1 Cor 16:15 describes not exclusively and perhaps not even primarily a temporal priority but means 'first' in the sense of 'model,' 'pledge,' or 'promise' of further fruit, i.e., of further conversions."

¹⁰⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 743: "His membership in the Areopagus Council implies that he had been an Archon, one of the highest offices in Athens. He belonged to the aristocratic class of the *decuriones* who were chosen from among the respected citizens (*honestiores*) of the city who were at least 25 years of age and whose financial means were between 20,000 (in smaller cities) and 100,000 sesterzes, financial means from which they were expected to pay for the expenses that were connected with their municipal or cultic responsibilities... According to a bishop of Corinth in the second century who happens to have the same name, Dionysos was the first *episkopos* of the church in Athens."

¹⁰⁷ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 571: "The reference to Damaris continues Luke's focus on the response of women (Acts 16:15; 17:4, 12)."

room won't ever be stoned or beaten or even imprisoned for telling people about Jesus. Maybe I'm wrong about that. But that's just my hunch for most of us.

Some of you might endure physical abuse for your faith, in this country or another. But I'm going to guess that most of you won't. But I'm going to say this. I believe that all of you will at some time in your life be mocked or insulted or alienated or ostracized by friends and family.

And some of it will come from people who say this, "You really believe this stuff. I mean I'm all for going to church and you know living a moral life and all that. But you really believe this."¹⁰⁸

"Yes, I do. And you need to believe it too." "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent."

I'll close with this. C. S. Lewis said once that "[Christianity] if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important."¹⁰⁹

The key word that I've used today is the word "apologetics," which is the discipline of defending the faith. That's a part of what Paul does in Athens. But Paul doesn't engage in apologetics to make faith in Christ respectable in the eyes of the Athenians. Neither is he interested in adding Jesus to the pantheon of gods in the Greco-Roman religious system. Syncretism is not an option! Christianity is of infinite importance or it's of no importance. It cannot be moderately important.

Let me say it even more bluntly than that. Either Christ is everything to you, or he's nothing. In the words of Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China, "Christ is either *Lord of all*, or he is *not Lord at all*!"¹¹⁰

The reality though is the Jesus is Lord of the universe, whether you acknowledge him or not. And you are either submitted to his lordship, partaking in his kingdom from now and for eternity. Or you are at war with the Lord of the universe, and therefore a recipient of his judgment from now and for eternity. Which way are you going to go? Are you going to go the way of the Athenians who mocked the gospel and mocked the resurrection? Or are you going to go the way of Dionysius and Damaris who embraced faith in Christ?

¹⁰⁸ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 27: "Today it is commonly held that it is fine to be a Christian as long as one does not take it too seriously. 'Christianity has produced some of the world's greatest minds. Some of her doctrines are fascinating for intellectual exercise. But to take them seriously — to base one's life on them? Surely you cannot be serious!'"

¹⁰⁹ C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 101.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Howard Taylor, *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret* (Moody: Chicago, 2009), 195.