

“So That They Would Search for God...”

Acts 17:22-31 • Psalm 66:8-20 • 1 Peter 3:13-22 • John 14:15-21

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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Sixth Sunday of Easter

We are going to go on a field trip today, to the city of Athens, Greece. Athens is a sprawling metropolis of some three million people; it is the capital of Greece, and one of the largest cities in Europe. Situated on a plain jutting out into the Aegean Sea and with easy access to the Mediterranean Sea, Athens is a bustling commercial center, with one of the largest ports in the world. It is home to many museums and monuments, some of which date back more than two thousand years.

The most prominent feature of Athens’s skyline is the Acropolis, an ancient citadel situated on a rocky plateau, on which stand the remains of several magnificent ancient buildings. One of them is the Temple of Athena Nike. Athena was the Greek goddess of wisdom and warfare, and was the patron and protector of the city of Athens. Nike was the goddess of victory, and was often identified with Athena. Yes, *that* Nike; the company took its name, which means “victory,” from this goddess. Another building, even more significant, is the Parthenon, a massive temple dedicated to Athena. The Greek word “parthenos” means “virgin.” In the Bible that word refers to Mary, the mother of Jesus; here in Athens it referred to Athena, who was said to have remained perpetually a virgin.

Those two temples, and several other buildings atop the Acropolis, were built five centuries before Jesus, during the height of the Golden Age of Athenian democracy, which gave birth to what has traditionally been called Western civilization. This was the time of the playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides; the historians Herodotus and Thucydides; the physician Hippocrates; the philosopher Socrates; and the politician Pericles. Other large temples were also built during this period, including the Temple of Hephaestus, the Greek god of the forge; and the Temple of Olympian Zeus, the greatest of all the Greek gods. There’s another rocky hilltop in Athens, smaller than the Acropolis, called the Areopagus, which means “the Hill of Ares,” the Greek god of war. This was where the Athenian governing council met. It is to this hill, the Areopagus, that we turn our attention today.

The apostle Paul was on one of his missionary journeys, traveling around and telling people about Jesus. In the year AD 51 he came to Athens. As he explored the city, he “was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” Paul was born and raised a Jew, and he had become one of the most learned of Jews, steeped in the history and traditions of his people, before he became a Christian. Judaism forbade the use of idols; remember the Second Commandment: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them.” Now Paul found himself in what was probably the most idol-filled city in the world. Ordinarily when he came to new cities he would start his ministry in the Jewish synagogues, and he did that here too – “he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons” – but since the Jews consisted of such

a small portion of the city's religions, he also took his ministry outdoors, to the forum, the *agora*, the center of Greek life and commerce, arguing "in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there." Athens was still a deeply philosophical city, so he also debated with "some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers." Epicureans took their beliefs from Epicurus, a Greek philosopher from the third century BC; they believed in living simple, ethical, and peaceful lives, that the soul does not exist after death, and that while gods exist, they have no involvement in human affairs. Stoics took their beliefs from Zeno, another Greek philosopher from the third century BC, and they took their name from the *Stoa*, a public pillared colonnade on one side of the marketplace, which is where Zeno taught. The Stoics valued practicing virtue and living in accordance with nature. So the Epicureans and the Stoics held some beliefs in common with Jews and Christians, but some other beliefs were *very* different.

Paul's focus was bringing people to faith in Christ, so he was talking openly about Jesus and his resurrection. This raised eyebrows. "Some said, 'What does this pretentious babbler want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.' ... So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus" – remember, that was the rocky hill where the Athenian governing council met – "and asked him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.'" He's not in trouble – these people are just curious. They have never heard any philosophy like *this* one before! Luke says: "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new." So Paul is invited to speak before the governing council of the great, historic city of Athens. This is a remarkable moment. What will he say to the leaders of this well-educated and cosmopolitan city? Well, it's a speech remarkably *unlike* any of his other known speeches. Usually he would begin by talking about Moses, David, and the prophets, about the ways God has worked in the history of the Jews, and use that as a bridge to talk about how God has worked through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Not here! There's *none* of that. He doesn't even mention Jesus by name!

"Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god."' ... He starts with the fact that many of the Athenians *worship some form of divinity*. These are *spiritual* people. There are temples all around to all sorts of gods with names. There is also, evidently, an altar dedicated to an *unknown* god, a god whose name is not known. Paul leaps on this. "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things." Now he's summarizing some traditional Jewish beliefs, like the belief that God created this world and every living creature that inhabits it, and the belief that God does not live in any temple built by humans, not even the great temple in Jerusalem that was built *five hundred years* before any of the temples in Athens. At that dedication ceremony, King Solomon had said, "Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27) So Paul is taking some very traditional Jewish teachings and presenting them in ways the Athenians could understand.

He continues: "From one ancestor he made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live." By "one ancestor" he is referring to either Adam or Noah, since according to the biblical account the members of Noah's family were the only humans to survive the flood. "The boundaries of the places where they would live" is probably a reference to the Table of the Nations in Genesis 10, which connects different descendants of Noah's family with certain places around the known world. Paul doesn't explain all

this in depth; he doesn't *need* to. He's just looking for ways to connect what he believes with what many of the Greeks already believe. Paul says the dispersion of people across the earth had a purpose: "so that they would search for God and perhaps fumble about for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us." Paul is saying we have an innate desire to *understand* the world, *why* things are the way they are, and *how* they got to be that way. In other words, *Is there a God?*

"For," he continues, "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we, too, are his offspring.'" He's quoting from literature here, but not Jewish literature, not from the scriptures that he knows and loves. The line "In him we live and move and have our being" comes from Epimenides, an early Greek philosopher, and the line "For we, too, are his offspring," comes from Aratus, a Greek poet, or from Cleanthes, a Greek philosopher, or both; both of those men said that. Paul is quoting *from the Greeks' own philosophers* to support his argument!

Then Paul makes his next move: "Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals." This is fascinating. He's using quotes from Greek philosophers and poets to argue that the Greek gods are all, well, false. Or that their ways of worshiping the Greek gods are all wrong. Or both. He's trying to go gently here, he's not blasting them with words like, "You're all going to hell!" as so many Christian preachers seem inclined to do. He's not trying to *judge* them so much as he is trying to *reach* them. There's a difference! He continues: "While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." *Now* he's talking about Jesus. *Now* he's talking about the coming judgment of the world. But he didn't go there first. He was trying to *meet them where they were at*.

Which brings me to my main point. When we're trying to talk to someone about Jesus, we need to *meet that person where they are at*. What do they *already* believe and value? What books and writers are meaningful to them? Start there. Look for points of connection. A lot of Christian evangelism takes the form of fear-mongering. That is definitely *not* what Paul was doing in Athens!

How well did this work? Was his strategy successful? "When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed, but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them." A member of the Athenian ruling council, a woman of some stature, and a few others were persuaded. Not a lot ... but it doesn't take many to start a church.

There is no indication that a church in Athens flourished quickly. In fact, the city of Athens is mentioned only one other time in the New Testament. Tradition says that Dionysius became the first (or possibly the second) bishop of Athens, but then there seems to have been a gap of a few decades during which the church floundered, before it flourished again. These people had spent hundreds of years worshiping Greek gods and absorbing Greek philosophy. Real change, *deep* change, takes time. Today, there are two large churches in Athens named in honor of Dionysius. This is one of them.

If you're trying to reach someone with the Gospel, I would encourage you to take your cue from Paul. Don't come on thick with a lot of hellfire and damnation. That just turns a lot of people off. Look instead for points of connection. Start there. Be honest about your beliefs without being judgmental of theirs. And be patient. Allow time for the seeds you are planting to take root and grow.

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