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Introducing the Unknown God

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

One of the ironies of our secular age is that as we've tried to remove God from our lives we've become a nation of idolators. Idolatry is not something reserved for ignorant religious people who worship something they've carved with their own hands. Consider the role that sports plays in our culture. For many people it looks a lot like a religion. It has temples, called stadiums. It has costumes, which we call uniforms. It has services, which we call games. It has worship music, which we call chants and cheers. It has high priests, called star athletes. And it has piety, which we call fan loyalty. Sounds like a religion to me.

But maybe sports isn't your thing. Maybe it's shopping. A recent study revealed that every day Americans buy an average of 3,972,603 movie tickets, 1,683,835 songs and albums from on-line resources, 1,650,000 DVD rentals from Netflix, 978,030 bags of Orville Redenbacher's Gourmet Popcorn, 568,764 Titleist golf balls, 443,650 large fries at Burger King, 160,968 bottles of Absolut Vodka, 7,500 Samsung LCD TVs, and 60 Ford Mustangs on eBay.

Scott Hafeman says, "Idolatry, whether ancient or modern, is the futile attempt to look for our lives to anyone or anything other than the one true Creator and Provider. Who do I thank when things go well? Who do I look to when things go badly? What's my source of security? Where do I gain my sense of worth in the world? What am I striving to achieve in life? The answers to questions like these will help determine whether we're honoring God as God or whether we're idolaters; whether that means we're praying to a stone image, drooling with envy over the car in our neighbor's driveway, or latching onto the latest self-help strategy."

We've been looking at Paul's second missionary journey in the book of Acts. Most of his efforts on this journey centered on the major cities of Europe like Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth and Ephesus. Besides being places of commerce and culture each of these places was a hotbed of idolatry. Perhaps the greatest city Paul visited on that 2nd journey was Athens and Athens was no exception.

I. Paul came to Athens, one of the world's great cities.

The golden age of Athens took place about 500 years before Paul got there. The Persians had destroyed the city completely, but the Athenians defeated them and rebuilt their city in glorious fashion. They constructed

grand structures like the Parthenon and Acropolis. They became the first example of democracy in human history. They produced amazing literature. Athens was a center of philosophical learning led by Socrates and Plato. It was an age of art: Praxiteles developed the classical form of human sculpture, later imitated by Michelangelo.

By the time Paul got to Athens it was a shadow of its former glory. But it was still a center of intellectual excellence and an impressive sight. Remember Paul left Berea by night and sailed all the way to Athens where he would wait for the arrival of Silas and Timothy. It's like Paul had some time to kill in Athens and what a great place to do it. Paul must have felt like a kid in a candy store. Sightseeing, anyone?

It was inevitable that Paul would have to confront the idolatry of Athens as we have to confront the idolatry around us and even the idolatry in our own hearts. The question is, how did Paul do that? How do we respond to the idolatry around us today? There were four parts to Paul's response which also serve as a model for us. Luke tells us what he saw, what he felt, what he did, and what he said.

II. What Paul Saw

Verse 16 tells us what he saw. **"Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols."** As Paul was "doing" Athens, taking in all of the amazing sights, what was it that left the greatest impression on him? It wasn't the architecture, history or wisdom of the city, but rather its idolatry. When it says "full of idols" Luke uses a word that means the city was "smothered" with them or "swamped" by them. One ancient visitor to Athens said rather sarcastically that it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man. It was filled with temples, shrines and altars. There were statues of Athena, Apollo, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Bacchus, Neptune, Diana. They were made of gold, silver, ivory and marble by the finest Greek sculptors. I'm sure Paul appreciated their beauty, but he wasn't blind to the fact that it was beauty in service not of the true God but of idols.

When we look at our culture, do we see what Paul saw? Verse 16 says he "was observing" all of this. It's a word that indicated he didn't just see the idols, but he looked and looked and thought about what he saw. Do we do that? Take a city like San Francisco. Could there

be a more beautiful place? Can any city match the splendor of the Golden Gate Bridge, the charm of Fisherman's Wharf, the sounds and smells of Chinatown, the excitement of a game at AT&T Park? It's an amazing place! But like every other city in America, it's a city submerged in idols. Do you see it? An idol is a god substitute. Any person or thing that occupies the place God should occupy is an idol. It's ironic that the Christmas season has become an idolatrous orgy of materialism. The advertising, coveting and overspending is all about idolatry. For some people, politics is an idol. We'll see that more and more as we head into an election year. John Calvin once said that our hearts are a perpetual factory of idols. We make fame, power, sex, sports, alcohol, friends, children, spouses, boyfriends and girlfriends, travel, TV and even religion into idols. The hardest place, of course, to see idolatry is in our own hearts. Paul knew all of this this. This is what Paul saw. Do we see this?

III. What Paul Felt

But v.16 also tells us what Paul felt. Luke says he "was being provoked within." The NIV says "he was greatly distressed." Luke, being a doctor, actually uses a medical term that was sometimes used to describe a seizure or an epileptic fit. You might say Paul had a fit over what he saw! It angered him; ticked him off; caused his blood to boil.

We have to ask the question, why was this? It's interesting that this same word is used of God's reaction to idolatry in the OT. When the Israelites made the golden calf it says God "was provoked" to anger. Why? For the honor and glory of his own name. Scripture sometimes calls this emotion "jealousy." Exodus 34:14 says **"the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God."** Jealousy is the resentment of rivals and whether it's good or bad depends on if the rival has any business being there. If we're jealous of another person's talents, that's bad because God made them with those talents. But if a husband is jealous of his wife's lover, that's good and right because that lover has no right to be there. It's the same with God. God says in Isaiah, **"I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images"** (42:8). You see, God has the right to our exclusive allegiance and so it's right for him to be jealous when we give that to someone or something else. This is why Paul had a fit. The idolatry around him aroused in him jealousy for the Name of God.

I wonder, is this what moves us? Yesterday afternoon I went shopping. I went to four large stores trying to find the best price for one item. As you might imagine it was crazy. It was a madhouse. And it struck me that if Paul were in my place, seeing what I saw, he would have reacted exactly as he did in Athens. He would have been provoked by the city full of idols. Imagine his

reaction when someone told him we do all this to celebrate the birthday of the One who was born in a manger! How do WE respond to all of this? Well, first of all we have to keep ourselves free from idols. If you go to the very last verse of 1 John it says, "Little children, guard yourself from idols" (1 Jn 4:21). We should also have compassion on people who don't know any better and have nothing else to live for. But the highest motive to rid ourselves and others of idolatry is jealousy for God's name; a desire for the true and Living God to be seen and worshipped for who he is. I think that only comes as you really get to know him. As you spend time in his presence and as you soak your mind and heart in his word.

IV. What Paul Did

We've seen what Paul saw and what he felt, but now let's see what Paul did. Let's read on.

"So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, 'What would this idle babbler wish to say?' Others, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,'--because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, 'May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean.' (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)" (vv. 17-21).

Paul might have been ticked off but his actions were positive and constructive. He didn't just throw up his hands in despair, or fall into a deep depression, or cuss out the Athenians. Rather he told them about Jesus.

He did this with three groups. First, as we've seen before he did this with the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles in the synagogue. He reasoned with them, showing from their own Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah. This is like speaking to "churched" people or religious people today. Second, he did this in the marketplace with people who were just passing by. This is like engaging in conversation today with people in a park or a mall or restaurant. He did this not just on the Sabbath but "every day" he was mixing it up with anyone who he could entice into a conversation. Thirdly, he did this with two groups of philosophers—the Epicureans and the Stoics. This is like talking to people in a university today. It's interesting because people today usually follow one of these two philosophies without knowing it.

The Epicureans were basically atheists; at least

they believed the gods to be so remote that they didn't have any involvement with our lives. They denied a life after death. They felt that this life was the only thing that really existed and that we should get the most out of it. They said that pleasure is the highest virtue. Their motto was "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." They lived for the moment. We don't call it Epicureanism, but this is how so many people think today.

The Stoics, on the other hand, were pantheists. They believed that everything is God; God is in the rocks and trees and everything. Their attitude toward life was one of resignation because the world is controlled by fate. So you had to learn to take whatever came your way. Their motto was "Grin and bear it." There are people today like that, who feel that the best thing they can do is to take whatever comes and handle it the best they can and they're proud of that.

Notice the initial reaction of these two groups to Paul. Some of them called him an "idle babbling." The word "babbling" is literally "seed-pecker." They saw Paul as one of the little birds in the marketplace going around pecking at seeds here and there. They regarded him as a mere collector of fragments of truth, gathering a few choice words from philosophies that he had picked up along the way and trying to impress people. They smiled and dismissed him contemptuously.

Others were intrigued by the fact that he seemed to present two new gods—one named Jesus and the other named Resurrection. The word for resurrection is a feminine word. The name Anastasia comes from this. They thought, "Oh how cool. We can add two more gods to our list: Jesus and Anastasia." Luke tells us these were the kinds of people who loved to just sit around and talk about the latest ideas. And they wanted to hear more so they invited Paul to speak to them at the Areopagus. Translated that means "Mars Hill." It used to be the place where the highest judicial court of Greece met. By Paul's day, it had become more like a council of men who kept watch over the cities religion and morals.

Paul's message will begin in v.22. Before we look at what Paul said I want to ask you, are you willing to mix it up with idolatrous people like Paul did? It's not always easy. People may misunderstand you. They may call you a seed pecker. But what we need is people who can converse with the same three groups Paul did: religious people who have no clue about what it means to have personal relationship with Jesus. We need people who can mix it up with passer-bys in malls, restaurants, parks, gyms, bars and soccer fields. And we need people who can dialogue with university professors and students. The worst thing we could do is stay so busy with church that we never shine the light of Christ in those dark places. Paul saw the city full of idols. Paul felt provoked out of jealousy for God's name. And Paul then DID something—he didn't retreat to his holy huddle; he went to where people were

at; he spoke to people; he got into the fray; he mixed it up.

V. What Paul Said

What did Paul say? His message is a classic. It has an introduction, a main body and a conclusion. The theme of the sermon is God. Call it "God 101." It makes a lot of sense that Paul would tell them about God because while they were very into the idea of God they were clueless as to who he really was. This is the cure for idolatry, whether it be in our own lives or someone else's. It all comes back to how you view God and the kind of relationship you have with him. The more you understand and know him, the less important the idols of your heart will be. That's what all those people in the mall are missing. They have never really been captivated by the true and Living God. That's what we should focus on at Christmas because Christmas is all about coming to grips with who God really is. Jesus came first and foremost to die for us but he also came to show us what God is like; he explains God (John 1:18).

A. Introduction: This is what Paul picks up on in his introduction. Look how he starts out. So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, **"Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD'. Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you"** (vv. 22–23). What a great introduction. He begins where people are at. He didn't denounce them or attack their idolatry. He almost paid them a compliment: "Men of Athens, as I've been walking about your city, I've noticed one thing about you: You're a very religious people." Then he said, "As I've been walking about, I found an altar to an unknown god." There were several of these in Athens. Paul found one of these, and said, "This is the God I want to talk about. What you worship ignorantly I have come to declare to you." It was a great introduction. It reveals the emptiness of idolatry and sets the stage for a revelation of the true and Living God.

B. Main Body: In the main body of his message Paul goes on and tells them four things about God. Each of these things would address some of the misconceptions these people would have had.

1. God the creator: First, God is the creator of all things. **"The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands;"** (v.24). What is he saying here? God is the Maker and not the one who was made. God wasn't created by man; he's the One who makes man and everything else that exists in all the universe. He's the originator of all things. As the Lord of heaven and earth he can't be confined by some temple we set up for him. He's far too big for that.

2. God the sustainer: Next he says that God is the sustainer of all things. **“nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things;”** (v.25). As the giver and sustainer of life, God isn't looking for anything from man. The Greek gods were very petty and had to be constantly appeased with gifts or they would be a very unhappy lot. But the true God is the giver and sustainer of life—he gives life and breath and all things. If for one second God withdrew his sustaining hand from us we would all disintegrate into nothing. It's by his grace that we even continue to breath!

3. God the ordainer: Third, he says that God is the ordainer of all things. Look at vv.26-27. **“and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;”** The Athenians believed they were a cut above all other people. Paul sets them straight and says, “Look, every nation (race) came from the same man. Not only that, God determines the course of those nations. He didn't just wind up the world and walk off into the sunset. He determines how long a nation should take to rise and then fall again. And notice God's purpose in this. He doesn't do this arbitrarily, but to accomplish the one great reason for which human beings exist: that we might “grope for him and find him.” That's always God's purpose. The events of human history have all been to this end, that people would be motivated to search for God. That's why natural disasters and plagues and wars break out. That's why times of prosperity come as well. God ordains all of these things to show people that they need God and to motivate them to search for him. And Paul corrects a misconception many of them had, saying, “he's not far from each of us.” God wants to be found. As soon as someone turns to him he says, “Here I am. I'm right here. I want to be in relationship with you. I'm not far.”

4. God the Father: The fourth thing Paul says about God is that he is the Father of all. **“for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’ Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man”** (vv.28–29). Paul now says that all humans are God's offspring in the sense that he created us all. And since he created us it's absurd to think of him like gold or silver or some kind of artwork made by man. Again, we are HIS children; he made us, we didn't make him. Notice Paul quoted some of their own literature to show this. He didn't quote the Scripture because they knew nothing of the Scripture. Instead, he quoted their own books, which it seems he read.

C. Conclusion: And then comes his conclusion.

The key to a good conclusion is to call people to action. It must answer the “so what?” question. “Thanks for the theology class, Paul. But, so what?” Here's what: “Everyone in every place must repent!” Look at vv.30-31. **“Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.”** Repentance means to change your mind; to turn around. We need to change the way we think and turn from our idols. Paul says the reason to repent is that God has been very patient to overlook the times of ignorance in the past, but a day is coming when he'll judge the world. Judgment is coming. The Epicureans didn't believe that. Many don't believe it today. Paul even tells them who this judge would be. Here, finally, at the end of the message, Paul brings in Christ. He says that God will judge through a man he has raised up. That man is Jesus.

Not a bad message. You'd think with a message like that people would respond in droves. Look what happens. **“Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, ‘We shall hear you again concerning this.’ So Paul went out of their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them”** (vv.32–34). When you compare this with the response to other sermons in Acts, there wasn't much of an impact. Peter's first two sermons brought in more than 5,000 people. Some scoffed at Paul's message. “He's just a seed-picker. What a waste of time.” Some were polite, but indecisive: “We'd like to hear you again”, they said. They delayed making a decision, as many people do. But a few believed. One of the scholars, Dionysius the Areopagite, believed. So did a woman named Damaris, and a few others. So Paul left a very small group of believers, about whom we know nothing. He never wrote a letter to this church. He never returned to Athens.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of the response, Paul teaches us how speak to idolatrous people. He teaches us to find common ground with people; to affirms their instincts for God; to speak their language. But at the same time he teaches us to challenge people's assumptions about God; to call people to act on what they've heard.

The needs are no different today than they were in Athens. It might be worse today because at least back then they know they were worshipping something, but we don't. Our culture is blind to its idolatry. Why then are we so tongue-tied? John Stott says, “We do not speak as Paul spoke because we do not feel as Paul felt.” We've never really been provoked like Paul was. We pray “Hallowed be

your name” but we don’t seem to care that his Name is profaned. I ask you, have you ever been provoked by a city full of idols?

If not, why not? Maybe we have to back one step further. If we don’t speak like Paul spoke because we don’t feel what Paul felt, it’s because we don’t see what Paul saw. That was the order: he saw, he felt, he spoke. It all begins with our eyes. Don’t just notice the idols around you; think about them; pray about them; and maybe the fires of jealousy for God’s name will be ignited in us as well.

“Little children, guard yourselves from idols.”

**I would like to acknowledge that the outline presented here has been borrowed from John Stott, “The Spirit, the Church and the World,” pp.276–290.*