

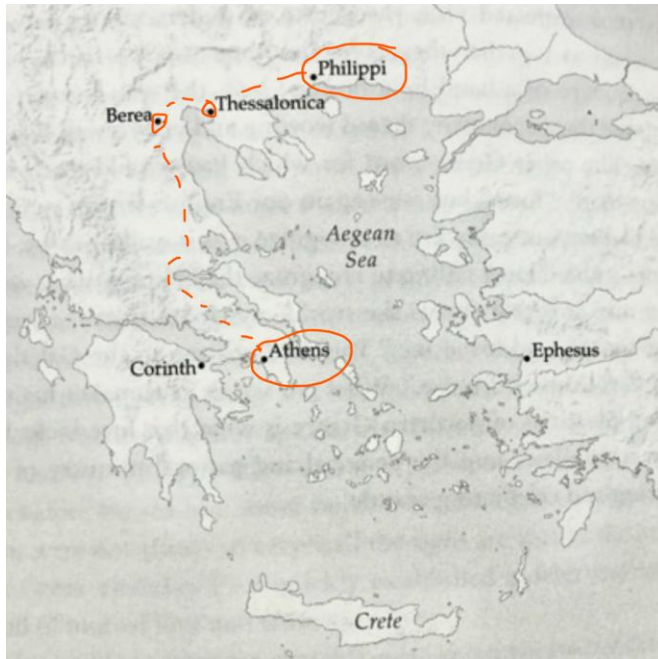
First Presbyterian Church
Acts 17:16-34, “Prayers To an Unknown God,”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 5/3/2026

Two weeks ago,
 we looked at the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus
 which followed a number of patterns we see in the death and
resurrection of Jesus, the gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples, and the way that
the gospel is received in the world.

Last week, we looked at the theme of liberation through the Spirit’s activity
 in the city of Phillipi and the very unusual relationships
 that emerged through that.

As we can see in this map, Paul’s travels continued
 from Phillipi in the Macedonian region of Greece through Thessalonica
 (where Paul had to be evacuated from an angry mob at night)
 and Berea (where the angry mob eventually found him)
 before eventually making his way south to Athens.

MAP



So everywhere Paul has been in Greece, he’s gotten into trouble.
 Will his experience in Athens be different?

Back in 2023 I was at a conference where I met a pastor from Portland
named Pete Armstrong who had just finished a short film
about Paul's ministry in Athens.
He was so committed to this project that he and his crew actually flew to Greece
and filmed the entire thing on site in modern day Athens
while he unpacked the implications of the story of Acts 17.
It's so well done that I want to share the first four minutes with you
to provide some background information on both the Apostle Paul
and a young man named Dionysius who is mentioned
at the end of the chapter as becoming a follower of Jesus.
(And we'll send out a link to the whole video in this week's e-news).

Here it is: 0:00 – 3:55 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRZdVU-rCac>

I hope you watch the video because it draws out the experience of Dionysius
and the choice he had to make
between his status as a member of the Areopagus
and Paul's claims about Jesus.

But I'm going to focus on the extraordinary challenge presented to Paul.

Athens must have been a priority for Paul to visit on his missionary journey.
Paul was born in Tarsus, which was home to 3 major stoic philosophers,
and he was trained by the great rabbinical scholar Gamaliel.

This meant Paul was uniquely prepared for this moment –
schooled in the philosophical traditions of Greece
while also committed to the way of monotheistic Judaism
and spreading the gospel that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel and,
therefore, the savior of the world.

Upon arriving in Athens, Paul leaned into both of these areas of expertise.
He spoke with Jews in the Synagogue and he bantered with Greeks
in the marketplace.

Did you notice Luke's snide remark in v. 21?

**“All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time
doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.”**

Well, it might not have been Luke's favorite thing, but this was Paul's happy place.
He loved to debate and evangelize for Christ.

But when word of his new ideas reached members of the Areopagus,
things took a substantial twist.

The Areopagus (also known as "Mars Hill) is a hill
just a few hundred yards from the Parthenon – you saw it in the video.

But it was also the name given to members of a group
that functioned like the Supreme Court of Athens.

In his biography on the Apostle Paul, NT Wright explains that the Areopagus court
policed the philosophies being promoted
so that people with dangerous ideas could be run off – or even killed.

In fact, this same court had overseen the trial of Socrates in 399 BC.
The charge against Socrates was "introducing foreign divinities,"
and "did not behave or worship the gods
in the way that most ordinary Athenians did,"
(though there were political motivations involved as well).

When found guilty of these charges, Socrates was sentenced to death,
and famously drank the cup of poison hemlock.

NT Wright is convinced that this must be in the background when Paul
is called from the marketplace to face the Areopagus to clear up the rumor,
"He seems to be advocating foreign gods."

Imagine how much more famous the Socrates story would have been in Greece
around the year 50 AD.

This is not just philosophers showing off,
this is Paul being put on trial!

The two main groups of philosophers were the Epicureans and the Stoics.

Epicureans believed that "everything in the world and human life has
'natural' causes," and there are forces at work that produce different effects, but the
gods are very far away from all this. The gods live in their own world and don't
have much to do with human life here on earth.

The Stoics, by contrast, were pantheists which means the gods, the earth,
and even human beings are ultimately all one and the same. "The divine spark of
life, the *logos*, exists within everything. This life consists of a fire or a spirit that
animates the whole universe." (NT Wright, *Paul, A Biography*, 2018)

So how does Paul respond to these two worldviews with his own ideas
about the God of creation, humanity, and what our role is here on earth?
How does he *defend himself* in this trial
in which he has been accused of promoting nonsense ideas?

Paul remains thoroughly Jewish in his perspective,
but affirms both the Epicureans and the Stoics in so far as he's able to do so
without abandoning the uniqueness of his faith.

First, he acknowledges their existing religious emphasis
and the way it permeates every aspect of their culture.
In fact they are so religious that they even have a temple
to a god they don't yet know the name of.

Then he announces that the very god about which they claim ignorance is the one
that he is going to tell them about.

Now that's clever, because he cannot be found guilty of promoting foreign gods
if he's connecting his message to the temple to the unknown god!

His next move is to make connections to both the Epicureans and the Stoics
while also pushing back on them
through the uniqueness of Israel's worldview.

The Epicureans believed that the gods existed outside the natural world
and left humans to bumble around on their own.
In a similar way, Paul describes his God as one who exists
outside of creation and gives people free will
so that they might seek God by faith –
even if just by accidentally bumping into him.

Paul could be saying that this is exactly
what the Athenians have done with their philosophical work –
bumped into the creator of all things who is the “unknown god.”

The Stoics believed that the gods were one with everything that exists.
And so Paul quotes Epimenides, a philosopher from the Island of Crete,
“For in him we live and move and have our being.”

Paul is saying God is distinct from creation,
but not quite so detached from creation as the Epicureans would have it.

Instead, Paul agrees with the way the famous Stoic poet Aratus has put it,
“We are his offspring.”

(Worth noting that Aratus was from Tarsus,
the same hometown as Paul.)

But against both these strands of philosophy,

Paul discounts the need for idols and temples to worship God.

The God who has made all that exists certainly has no need
to be fed by human hands
(as those who leave offerings at Athenian temples believe).

There’s some tension, but Paul is making as many points of connection as he can
to bolster their view of the gospel (and perhaps to save his own skin).

Then he closes with v. 31:

**“For God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice
by the man he has appointed.**

**He has given proof of this to everyone
by raising him from the dead.”**

The Areopagus thinks *they* are the ones who render proper judgment,
but Paul turns the tables and suggests that their ignorance
of the unknown God is not longer valid
now that proof of God’s judgement has been offered
through the resurrection of Jesus.

It must have been a tense moment. And certainly some scoffed at him.

But others were intrigued and wanted to hear more.

And a few – like Dionysius – were fully convinced
and went on to join the cause of Christ with
every last bit of their lives.

We still live among many people who offer worship to an unknown god.

People bump into their Creator unawares

while being nourished by the wonders of nature,

when they give of their time and resources

to care for a neighbor in need and feel a connection

to something greater than themselves,

when practicing mindfulness or meditation,

when encountering a piece of art that takes their breath away,
while having great sex,
or when eating a piece of German chocolate cake
that makes them say, “Oh. My. God.”

Like the Athenians, we 21st Century westerners
are thoroughly spiritual in every way.
This is not to be brushed off or criticized – it’s real.

And the fact that some people catch a fuller glimpse of their Creator
in the ways I listed than they do through the church of Jesus Christ
should give every Christian a moment of pause.

And yet – bumping into God’s grandeur while walking in the woods
will never bring someone to a recognition
that they are made in God’s image, that they are loved to their core,
that they have been redeemed
by the death and resurrection of Christ
(who is their brother and their Lord)
and that the grace of God is calling them into a life of purpose and beauty
that exceeds all other callings this world has to offer.

So the role of the church is be the bridge. To share the rest of the story.
Not by debating philosophers in Areopagus,
but by living out the story of Jesus love every single day.

May the Spirit inspire us by Paul’s example to do that with all that we have.