

**Acts 17:16-23 (NIV)**

<sup>16</sup>While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup>So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup>A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbling trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. <sup>19</sup>Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup>You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean.” <sup>21</sup>(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.) <sup>22</sup>Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup>For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

## 44-17-01-Proclaiming the Unknown God

Kingdomtide, evangelism, pluralism, truth, reason, repentance.

Acts 17:16-23

The Good News of Christ surpasses the best ideas humans can invent.

**INTRODUCTION:**

–While Paul was “*waiting... in Athens,*” he *shared the Gospel*. That’s our job, too, while we await the 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent of Christ. In our **text**, Paul’s situation was similar to ours today. He was in a society “full of idols,” where the true God was “UNKNOWN,” and where truth was at the mercy of “the latest ideas.” Now, as back then, the Holy Spirit helps us let such a society know that **HOM.idea**. Christians carry inside their hearts...

**I. A Gospel Reaction** [like a reflexive response]

A. **v.16**, Paul “*was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols*”

1. When we get “distressed” by our culture’s idolatry, it’s really the reaction of the Holy Spirit in us, who loves truth and hates lies.
2. An idol is whatever is trusted in for the security, the provision, or the happiness that only God can give [the Greeks had deities of sex, of war, and of commerce; our society skips over “gods” for a trust in sexuality itself, or in the government, or in the economy] It’s all idolatry!

B. But a Gospel distress can lead to discussion!– **v.17**, Paul “*reasoned* [Gk., dialogued]... *in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.*” (Find out people’s questions before giving answers!)

C. Like Paul in **v.18**, when *our Gospel reaction* leads us to share “*the good news about Jesus and the resurrection,*” we might face opposition:

1. Worldly “philosophers” may scoff: “*What is this babbling trying to say?*”
2. Or we may get put under the spotlight– **v.19**, “*they...brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus*” [a judicial site used for public debates].
3. Our words may seem “*foreign*” (politically incorrect) to some– **v.20**, “*You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears*” (We can’t assume anymore that the Gospel is familiar to everyone) [Some ministers go through modern seminaries *never once hearing the Gospel*. One pastor told me that after his ordination interview, he turned to his colleague and said, “*We could both be Buddhists and they’d never know it!*”]

**TRANS:** [In the Lord of the Rings story, the hobbit Frodo’s sword called “Sting” glowed with blue light when enemy orcs were nearby. That sword is like our Gospel reaction.] When meeting religious falsehoods, the Gospel makes “the

sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God” glow in our hearts, ready to be unsheathed to pierce false concepts with **Christ’s Good News** which **surpasses the best ideas humans can invent**. Today, that same Gospel clashes with a very popular idea in our society...

## II. A Gospel of Relativism (“All truth is relative! No absolute truth!”) (How did Paul approach this Greek plurality of belief systems?)

- A. He acknowledged their faith— v.22, “I see that...you are **very religious**”
1. All people believe [Even atheists have faith that there is no God.]
  2. Everybody has a *faith muscle*, divinely given so we can grab and hold on to *truth* (not just to *flex* to show *how strong our faith is!*)
- B. Paul noted their pluralism— v.22, “in every way you are very religious”
1. How does God’s absolute truth deteriorate into relativism?— v.21, “All the Athenians...spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.” (God’s truth is *changeless*, but “*the latest ideas*” come and go with the *unstable whims of popularity*.)
  2. In v.23, [Paul] “looked carefully at [their] *objects of worship*” (A fast way to analyze a belief system is to ask, “*Show me how humanity fits into your world view.*” [Francis Schaeffer’s illustration of how false philosophies fail to fit the whole of Man into their tiny barrels of belief—*headfirst, feetfirst, sideways, or bent in half*—some of our *humanness* always dangles on the outside the barrel. Our full humanity (*body, soul and spirit*) can’t fit into falsehood. We fit only in the reality created by the true God.]
- C. Paul knew what these people needed— v.23, “what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.” (When some part of us doesn’t fit into a *belief barrel*, it’s because we are created in the image of *the true God* Who is *UNKNOWN* in that belief system!)

**TRANS:** The Greeks made gods in their own image. Their mythologies had deities with *all the character flaws and moral weaknesses* of human depravity. It was the best belief system they could come up with, but such gods can’t help lost humanity. **Today, as Paul did, we can boldly proclaim Gospel truth** in the midst of a modern plurality of bankrupt beliefs. **Christ’s Good News surpasses the best ideas humans can invent**. It doesn’t come from human imagination, but from...

## III. The Living God [Who became a human, died a human, but rose immortal]

- A. Their introduction to the “*UNKNOWN GOD*” resulted from Paul

(v.18c), “preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.”

1. The phrase “*preaching the good news*” is one word: *gospelizing*, from the noun, *gospel*, which means, *good message* [lit. a combination of 2 Greek words: *eu* {good}+ *angelos* {messenger}, or our modern word *angel*] (If you want to be an angel to someone who’s frustrated that their belief system is too small to give them *all the life they long for*, tell them the **good message** about *abundant life offered by Jesus*.)
  2. “the good news about Jesus”—that God became one of us, sacrificing Himself to save us—is an *awesome mystery*, very hard for many to believe, because it *seems too good to be true*. (But if they only knew how much this “UNKNOWN GOD” really loved them, they’d know *the Incarnation and the Cross* are too good not to be true!)
  3. Their known gods, based on their *best mythological ideas*, offered the Athenians no hope against humanity’s worst enemy: death! (This “*resurrection*” idea—where *life defeats death*—was *unknown* to their theology [their *god-logic*], and it was also why the *true God of life* was, to their way of thinking, “*AN UNKNOWN GOD.*”)
- B. When we tell about **Christ’s Good News that surpasses the best ideas humans can invent**, people may close their minds, or they may be open to hear more— v.20, “You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean.”

## CONCLUSION:

—In a world where people call truth relative, *absolute truth* sounds *hard and unbending*, but that hardness is good news. [Dr. Paul Brand, in his book *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*, mentions the necessity of a sturdy skeletal structure for the body’s foundation. The hard bone gives us the **freedom** of *protection, strength, stature, and movement*. Without it, we’re an *immobile blob of shapeless tissue*. That’s how society is, when it rejects hard, unbending absolute truth: one huge moral mess!]  
—*Absolute truth* confronts the plurality of relatively true truths arising from “*the latest ideas*” presently popular. Some will respond to this Good News of Christ. When they do, the *God of absolute truth* will cease to be “*AN UNKNOWN GOD*” and become **God their Heavenly Father**.  
—So, while we’re waiting for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent of our King, let’s follow the example of Paul. In the midst of our pluralistic culture, let’s let the Holy Spirit lead us into creative ways of sharing with other our Gospel faith in Jesus.