

Urban Evangelism and Dialogue in Athens

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning, my name is Christine Grant and I am part of the Cragmont Community Group.

And today's scripture reading is from the book of the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 17, verses 16 through 34, as printed in the liturgy.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace, day by day with those who happened to be there.

A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, what is the babblers trying to say? Others remarked, he seemed to be advocating foreign gods.

[1 : 16] They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus, the resurrection, then they took him and brought him to the meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, may we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?

You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean. All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking and listening to the latest ideas.

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said, people of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with your object, I even found an altar with this inscription to an unknown God.

So you are ignorant of the very things you worship. And this is what I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.

And he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

[2 : 35] From one man, he made all nations that they should inhabit the whole earth. And he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.

God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him. Though he is not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being.

As some of your own poets have said, we are his offspring. Therefore, since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone.

An image made by human design and skill. In the past, God overlooked such ignorance. But now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with the justice by the man he has appointed.

He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered. But others said, we want to hear you again on this subject.

[3 : 42] At that, Paul left the council. Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysus, a member of the Areopagus, and a woman named Damaris.

And a number of others. This is the word of the Lord. Thank you, Christine, for that scripture reading.

And thank you, Eric and Garrett and Irene for leading us in worship. And thank you to Isaac. I think he scrambled a lot this morning to make sure our slides were working. So thank you so much, Isaac.

That was awesome. Again, my name is Andrew, and I'm one of the pastors here. And super happy to be sharing God's word with you. So will you pray with me as we open up? Father, we want to hear from you.

We want to have our eyes open to who you are and what you've done and how great you are in comparison to all these other things that we are tempted to bow down to.

[4 : 42] Would you help us to perceive these counterfeit gods all around us and to see that you are better, you are higher, and there is none like you. So we pray all these things in the name of Jesus.

Amen. All right, Christ Church. So we're picking up in the book of Acts. We're backing up. And we're in Acts chapter 17.

And as I mentioned last week, a big focus in this chapter, in Acts chapter 17, is Paul's methodology. Paul's witness in word. Paul's method of what we call evangelism.

All right, and I'm aware that for a lot of us, this word evangelism can be kind of triggering. Maybe it sounds kind of like Christianese or reminds us of colonization or some hokey religious salesmanship.

And I also know that, you know, the moral relativism of our present speak your truth, you do you, who am I to judge age has so infiltrated our psyches that evangelism can feel incredibly counterintuitive, right?

[5 : 42] Even immoral to some of us to share Jesus as the good news, right? The truth in a pluralistic society that values tolerance above maybe everything else.

But honestly, every single one of us, every single one of us, we all have an evangel. An evangel, which means the good news, which means the gospel. Each one of us has some version of good news that we cannot help but share.

We are all evangelistic, okay? We are all evangelistic. On a micro level, we're always sharing, what, new diets, new books, podcasts, that new Netflix documentary series, various lifestyles and brands that we swear will change your life, right?

Because they change our lives for the better. And then even on a macro level, we are inundated, right, with evangelistic good news messages all the time, right? Alternative gospels like the gospel of upward mobility, the gospel of careerism, the gospel of salvation through science, the gospel of this political tribe, or that one.

Evangelism is happening all the time. It's happening all the time, whether we notice it or not. And no matter how critical, no matter how skeptical we all claim to be, there is no doubt that this world has been influenced significantly by all manner of evangelism.

[6 : 58] Everyone is bearing witness to something. Everyone is bearing witness to something. So what should that look like for us, for those who profess to follow Jesus? I want to point out three things from Acts chapter 17 today about bearing witness to Jesus.

First, the spirit of Christ's witness. Second, the scope of Christ's witness. Third, the strategy of Christ's witness. All right, the spirit, the scope, and the strategy of Christ's witness. So number one, first, the spirit of Christ's witness.

Now in verse 16, here it says, while Paul was waiting in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. Perhaps even more helpfully, the Greek literally says that he was provoked in the spirit within him when he perceived the city was full of idols.

And the point is this, the spirit of Christ's witnesses we perceive and are provoked by the surrounding idols around us. Christ's church, in this Acts series, you know, we're banging this drum of be Jesus' witnesses.

Be Jesus' witnesses. But we don't want to bang this drum as some kind of impersonal law for your rote obedience as faithful Christians. It has to come from the core of our very beings.

[8 : 06] It has to come from our spirits. If our spirits do not perceive the idols in our cities, and if our spirits are not provoked by these same idols, we will never be faithful and effective witnesses for Christ.

So my question for us is, do we perceive the idols that are around us? And are we provoked by them? Do we perceive them and are we provoked by them? Imagine what Paul saw as he entered into the city of Athens, right?

He's going into Athens, he sees what? Athena's Parthenon, he sees Zeus' Olympian Temple, maybe he sees Aphrodite's Temple. To us today, and probably to many living in Athens back then, you know, just simple cultural artifacts.

Magnificent works of architecture, right? But for Paul, these weren't just cultural artifacts. These weren't just buildings to admire, but they were expressions of worship to false gods.

See, Paul saw through the beauty that everyone else simplistically admired, and he perceived what had a strong hold upon the hearts of the Athenians. He perceived their highest allegiances, their highest values by observing the details of their cities, how they invested their time, how they invested their treasure, how they invested their talent, what they honored, what they venerated with their art and their architecture.

[9 : 20] So Christchurch, are we as perceptive of the cities that we inhabit? Maybe we don't see outside a statue built to Zeus or a temple for Athena or Aphrodite, but do we not see the shrines and altars to the gods of sex, money, and power all around us?

San Francisco, what do you see? Salesforce and the Transamerica Building, not evil in and of themselves. Don't get me wrong, I know some of you work there. But are they not architectural testaments to what the Bay Area most values?

Are they not? How about lifestyle Instagram influencers, all right? Are they not priests and prophets unto the gods of sex and power, testifying of the good news of being sexy, the good news of being successful?

As Christ witnesses, we need to be attentive to the Spirit of God, to see the world as God sees the world, and to perceive the counterfeit gods who falsely promise to satiate our appetites and achieve our ambitions and secure our approval.

But not only do we need to perceive these idols, we need to be provoked by them. We need to be provoked by these idols that we perceive. This word here in verse 16 about Paul's distress is a word of incredible emotional turmoil.

[10 : 37] And I think what it was, was a Christ-like mixture of what I want to call madness and sadness. Madness and sadness. See, Paul's spirit, it was outraged. It was truly outraged.

He saw that Yahweh was not being worshipped in Athens, and he was livid. He saw people made in the image of God, not honoring God as God, and he was indignant. But equal to his outrage, his spirit also grieved.

His spirit also grieved. Paul saw that Yahweh's good intentions were being traded for self-destructive lies that only deepened the world's wounds. He saw hurting people in need of salvation, seeking salvation from gods that could not save.

And he was heartbroken. In the presence of idols, the spirit of Christ's witnesses, we are provoked to madness and to sadness at the same time. And this is super important, so important to feel both, madness and sadness as we perceive the idols around us.

Because you know what? If you are only ever mad but not sad at the idolatry around you, you are going to be obnoxious. You will form your own tribe of self-righteousness.

[11 : 46] You're going to have a moralistic Christianity. You will never move toward people who need Jesus. Or if you do, you will never communicate the truth of Jesus to them with tenderness and kindness and love.

And if you are only ever mad and not sad about the idolatry around you, you will ultimately never understand the people who disagree with you. You will never empathize with the hurts that they're hoping their idols will heal for them.

But you know, if you are only ever sad but not mad at the idolatry around you, you're going to be a coward. You will have a relativistic Christianity. You will excuse or ignore the harm that idols truly do to people.

And you will never have the courage to tell people what they really need to hear and that Jesus Christ alone is Lord. See, it's easy to be either sad or mad, to have conviction or compassion, but it's hard, it's hard to have both.

And you know why? Because for those of us who err on the side of madness, we're afraid. We're afraid that if we ever lean into sadness and compassion toward evildoers, we will minimize the truly heinous offense of evil.

[12 : 54] We're afraid we'll render evil explainable, maybe even acceptable. And who wants to be sad for Hitler, right? Who wants to be sad for Hitler? Isn't it easier just to ignore his humanity and his backstory and to villainize him as the chief of sinners way worse than any of us, right?

Madness makes sense. Sadness sounds like compromise. But for those of us who err on the side of sadness, we are afraid that if we ever lean into madness and conviction, we will set ourselves up for an impossibly high standard to live by that we know we will fail at.

So why not just be lax about everything, right? Do whatever you want with your body. You do you. Pretty much anything goes. Just try hard not to hurt people. Try not to hurt people's feelings.

And basically, you're a good person. No need to get mad. Madness is unkind. Madness is self-righteous. It's hard to feel both madness and sadness because we are either afraid of moral laxity or we're afraid of moral-ism.

But you know, if we understand the gospel, and if we understand the cross of Christ, this is the only way we can truly hold both. Pastor Tim Keller says, if you don't have a cross in your religion, you will either have a moralistic religion or a relativistic religion.

[14 : 11] You will either have a God who is very demanding, and that's it, live up or else. Or you'll have a God who is so completely accepting, but whose love for us cost him not a thing.

And a thunder religion or a sweetheart religion never has changed anybody. Never. Only the cross. Only the gospel. That Jesus Christ had to die. God is that holy.

And that Jesus Christ had to die. He's that loving. See, witnesses of Christ must be mad. We must be mad that the holy God who offered free salvation at the cost of his own son is still not worshipped in so many places in the world.

And witnesses of Christ must also be sad. That across the world, hurting people do not know the holy, healing love of God demonstrated in the cross of Christ and the joy of worshipping him as Lord.

So that's point number one. That's point number one, the spirit of Christ's witness. Now let's keep going. I also want to talk about the scope. The scope of Christ's witnesses. So here, Paul is in Athens, and his spirit perceives and is provoked by the city's idols.

[15 : 16] And while those who get mad at idols might declare war, right? And those who get sad about idols might flee or just try to blend in, Paul, who is maddened and saddened by these idols, he leans in to this idol-infested city yet without compromise.

And see, this is the scope of Christ's witnesses. We go everywhere to the ends of the earth. In verse 17, Paul first goes to the synagogue, right? He goes to his own cultural people who have the most context for his message, people who expected the Messiah that he preached.

But he doesn't stay in this comfort zone, right? The scope is wider than his own people, wider than those simply interested in institutional religion. He also goes where? Into the marketplace.

And this is not him just going to Trader Joe's, all right? The marketplace was the center of public life. In a world without the internet, right? Everything had to happen in the marketplace. Business, art, academics, entertainment.

There were no newspapers, no ads. You had to go and you had to listen to the different voices and the different messages all selling their religions and ideologies and political agendas and lifestyles.

[16 : 24] And so in this marketplace and to this marketplace, Paul, he adds his own voice. He adds his own message, his own evangel, his own good news. And verse 17 says, Every day with those who happen to be there, he reasoned with them.

And he dialogued with them. Verse 18 says he was debating or more simply in the Greek, pondering, comparing views and conversing. Some commentators speculate that the author Luke here is trying to make a comparison actually between Paul and Socrates as he's going about reasoning with people.

So Paul is out there, right? Using the Socratic method and the scope of his witness is wide. And he was quite successful. So successful that the philosophers from the two most popular schools of thought at the time, they invited him to speak at what was called the Areopagus.

They wanted to hear him say more. But what you should know is that this is also what they did to Socrates centuries earlier before executing him for his impiety, for his strange ideas.

Verse 18 indicates that some even suspected Paul to be guilty of this as well. Preaching foreign gods. So this was quite serious. Paul's life may have been endangered.

[17 : 36] But he went. He went. He committed himself to bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth. That's how much he believed in the goodness of the good news of Jesus. And the question for us, Christ Church, is where will we take our good news?

Where will we take our good news about Jesus? Even if it threatens our lives. There is no place that the gospel should not go. There is no place that the gospel cannot influence.

The gospel does not just belong within the scope of institutional religion. It speaks to businessmen just as much as the priest. It bears on the academy, the arts, the sciences, the economy, even as it bears on the church.

We must take it into our lecture halls and our workplaces and our city councils just as much as we take it into our campus ministries and on our mission trips, taking every single thought captive to Christ.

We are committed to doing that here as a church. So I want to invite you all to a faith and work event that we are putting on. Denise Yon and David Gill will be leading it. And I believe Cheruba, Wes Selke, and some others will be participating.

[18 : 40] We're going to be talking about the integration of our faith and our work. And we're going to be inviting people into what we want to call vocational discipleship. Really understanding how does our faith and our work, how does it come together into a holistic way of following Jesus.

So mark your calendar, September 10th, Friday at 7 p.m. You can see that in the liturgy as well. And this is important to us because why? Because the scope of Christ's witness, it's wide. It's super wide.

And we want to equip the church to witness winsomely. We want to equip you to witness to Jesus Christ in a very winsome, powerful way. And this brings me to my last and also my longest point, the strategy.

All right? The strategy of Christ's witness. Now again, Paul is in Athens. We're just like in Lystra. These people he's speaking to, they don't share the same convictions.

They don't share the same assumptions that he does. They don't know the story of Israel. And they certainly don't view the Hebrew scriptures as the authoritative word of God. So the question is, where do you even start with such people?

[19 : 46] People not unlike your average Bay Area person, right? How do you call people to change their minds, to repent? And how do you persuade them that Jesus is Lord? How do you bear witness to the good news about Jesus, to a people swimming in a sea of multiple alternative good newses?

Well, I want to suggest a strategy. I mentioned it last week that is unique. To the Christian faith. And I want to call this strategy, the strategy of subversive fulfillment. All right? Subversive fulfillment.

See, at the Areopagus, Paul, what he does is he shows his audience how the truth of Jesus not only subverts their deepest commitments, but also fulfills their deepest concerns at the very same time.

Subverts and fulfills. See, as a follower of Christ embedded in the biblical story of creation and fall and redemption, Paul has a unique toolkit here. He has a unique view of his God and his religious others.

Although these religious others clearly believed different things than him, and although they clearly worshipped other gods than him, Paul could explain why and how their false religions came to be.

[20 : 52] It was because of the fall. See, Paul understood that God created all people, all people, and made them in his image. And therefore, every single person, every single person that he encountered, he knew that by their very nature, they had a sense of the one true God, and by their very nature, they were made to worship.

So when Paul engaged these people of other beliefs and these people of other religions and faith, the problem for him was not that they stopped being religious and they stopped worshipping, it's that they stopped worshipping rightly.

They actually kept worshipping, but their worship and their religious devotion, it was misdirected by sin. Now, can you see how that might influence the way we bear witness about Jesus?

Can you see how that might change the way we go and tell people the good news about Christ? Notice what he doesn't do. He doesn't go angrily condemning them as pagan idolaters, right?

That idiotically bow down to stones crafted by the hands of men. And he also doesn't cowardly, you know, minimize the differences between their gods and his god as minor or insignificant.

[22 : 03] Instead, according to the light of what God's revealed, he winsomely establishes both a point of contact and a point of critique. And this is so important to notice about Paul's method.

Out of both madness and sadness, out of both conviction and compassion, he neither condemns nor capitulates. His main concern is not simply to critique these idolatrous Athenian worshippers, but to critique their inferior objects of worship.

And to confront them with what? The good news, the supremacy of Christ. The one true God who alone is worthy of all our religious devotion. And the way he connects and critiques, it's so masterful.

And I want to show this to you. Look at verse 22 with me. He doesn't open up again with, repent, you wicked pagan idolaters. But he says, people of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious.

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. So Paul notices, he begins with their values.

[23 : 09] He begins with their commitments. And he says, you're obviously a very pious people. You clearly value your relationship with whatever you deem to be divine. You know, I see all these altars, I see all these temples in your city, and you are so earnest to cover all your religious bases that you even worship an unknown god.

Let's talk about that, he says. Let's talk about that. Clearly you have a sense of the transcendent. And yet, that you also don't fully know all there is to know about the divine.

So he says, what therefore you yourselves claim to be ignorant of, this I proclaim to you. And he wants to fill that knowledge to them as he communicates the gospel to them.

See, Paul, he meets them where they're at. This is what he's doing. He's meeting them where they're at, and he's connecting with their own beliefs, their own religious sensibilities. But he doesn't just say, cool, cool, you know, you worship an unknown god, I happen to call him Jesus, but basically we're on the same page.

Close enough. No. Even as he connects with them and starts with their own beliefs, he then presses their religious sensibilities to show them the inconsistency and the inferiority of their misdirected worship.

[24 : 21] He says, I see you are very religious. You so desire to honor the divine that you even have an altar to some unknown god that you may have overlooked. But let me tell you something about this god you yourselves claim not to know.

He says to them, unlike your conception, you know, of multiple gods where you have a god of thunder and a god of the sea and a god of war and a god of wisdom and art and love or a god of this nation or a god of this city, the one true god, verse 24, the god who made the world and everything in it is the lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.

And he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man, he made all the nations that they should inhabit the whole earth and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.

God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him though he is not far from any one of us. See, Paul starts with a strong creator-creature distinction and then he shows them that all their religious striving, all their reaching out to find him, all their idolatrous worship, all the lengths that they go to to maintain these temples and to serve their gods, all these things actually contradict their very own piety toward God for to treat God, the creator, as needing them to serve him, like to build him a temple to live in, is actually not honoring to God at all.

The one true God who made all things, the one true God who is transcendent and yet also near to them, he needs nothing. He needs nothing. So holding his biblical understanding of God, yet without even opening up the Hebrew scriptures, Paul reasons with them based upon their own religious sensibilities to show them their own inconsistencies.

[26 : 14] He even quotes their poets, right? Their religious authorities. Verse 28, for in him we live and move and have our being and we are his offspring. And Paul says in verse 29, so how can you continue your idol worship then?

Treating God like an image of gold or silver or stone crafted by human hands when you also believe that you are his offspring and that he made you. He says, don't you see the inconsistency?

Don't you see how your idolatry actually presupposes and is evidence of the one true God even as it dishonors him? I hope you can see this is an incredibly masterful argument that he's making.

It's not just to tell someone that they're wrong. That's not what we're about. We don't just tell people that they're wrong but we want to show them that they're wrong on the basis of their own beliefs which actually point to the truth all along.

See, this is how subversive fulfillment works. It subverts and it deconstructs the misdirected worship of those who don't bow down to Jesus. And then you know what it does?

[27 : 16] It then points them to Jesus as the only one who can truly fulfill their deepest longings, the only one who can truly make sense of their deepest intuitions. It's a method of compassion and conviction.

It shows people they're wrong not just because they're stupid and irrational and evil. We have too much of that. Oh, they're just wrong because they're being dumb. They're just wrong because they chose to be wrong, right?

No, it's because they actually had something right and good that got misdirected but can also be redeemed by the good news of Jesus. Do you see, do you see how this makes all the difference in how we approach people and call them to repentance and faith in Jesus?

And honestly, in how we, even Christians, should approach ourselves with the subversive fulfillment of Christ. See, this strategy of subversive fulfillment isn't some just apologetic tactic to use on religious others who don't believe in Jesus.

It's a strategy to evangelize our very own selves, to preach the gospel to ourselves, with all of our addictions to pornography and substances and to our careers. Whether our allegiances be, you know, to the gods of sex or the gods of money or the gods of power, these deceptive gods who promise to secure our approval, satisfy our appetites and help us succeed in our ambitions.

[28 : 37] The sin and idolatry in all of our lives is so much more complicated than, hey, I feel like being bad and dishonoring God right now. No. We sin, we all bow down to other gods because we've come to believe that in some way these counterfeit gods will fulfill us.

We're all looking for fulfillment outside of Christ and it's killing us. But the good news of the gospel is that God wants to subvert our self-destructive pursuits of fulfillment, not at the expense of our ultimate fulfillment, but to actually satisfy our longings with himself.

With himself. That's what God is up to with this subversive fulfillment of the gospel in Christ. Now I want to end with a story about this altar to the unknown God that Paul referred to.

See, as legend had it, centuries earlier during the time of Epimenides, there was this huge plague in Athens that just ravaged the city. And the people's attempts to appease the gods, they just seemed to have no effect whatsoever until one day this supposedly wise sage, he took a flock of sheep and from the Areopagus he sent these sheep out and wherever the sheep would stop, they would build an altar there to an anonymous God and then they would sacrifice the sheep upon that altar.

And as legend had it, Athens was returned to health. And I share this story because whether or not it's true, I hope that you can see it's absolutely heartbreaking. Not just as a demonstration of the impotent gods that the Greeks trusted in or the cruelty of this anonymous God who just waited for them to finally get it right and build an altar to him, this unknown God and sacrifice sheep to him.

[30 : 21] But it's also a heartbreaking illustration of what so many of us, modern, 21st century people are still engaged with. Because think about it, are we really less naive?

Are we really less superstitious? In verse 27, Paul uses this image, right, of people just kind of walking around blind, fumbling around, trying to reach and find God, hoping against hope, trying all manner of things, no matter how arbitrary, no matter how ridiculous, looking for that ever so elusive fulfillment.

Even serving and making random sacrifices to hypothetical unknown gods that might not even exist, much less save. Gods they don't know they can trust and probably don't even love them.

And why? Why was humanity, why has humanity historically groped in the dark so pathetically? Why? Well, because what else can we do but strive and try anything, anything to deal with the plague of death?

Isn't that what we're up to? Isn't this us? But, but what if there was a God who didn't leave us in the dark? What if there was a God who didn't leave us in the dark?

[31 : 38] A God who was truly there, so present, so close to us and our human experience that he himself tasted death in our place? And what if this God who tasted death conquered death by an actual, historical, and pretty much irrefutable resurrection?

And what if he offered us this fullest fulfillment of resurrection life and new creation? would this not be better news of a better God? Would this not be better news of a better God?

Christchurch, here once more, Acts chapter 17, verse 30. In the past, God overlooked our ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

For he 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. Is this not better news of a better God?

Whoever has ears, let them hear the forever better news of the crucified and risen Christ. Jesus is better. Jesus is better. Will you pray with me? Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[32 : 47] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.