

## The Church's Relevance

Acts 17:16-34

One of the frequent criticisms that people outside the church will make, and one of the honest questions young people within the church often wrestle with, is whether the church is still relevant today. In a recent Barna poll, only 30% of people not involved in church between the ages of 16-29—only 30% agreed that that Christianity is even just somewhat relevant to their life.<sup>1</sup> 72% agreed that it is “out of touch with reality,” 78% that it is “old-fashioned,” and 68% that it is “boring.”<sup>2</sup>

And of course the statistics dealing with attendance and affiliation confirm that picture. Most denominations in America are declining today.<sup>3</sup> More and more people identify as “nones”—not the Catholic sisters, but N-O-N-E—none, as in ‘no religious affiliation.’<sup>4</sup> And somewhere between 6,000 and 10,000 churches die every year in America.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the greatest evidence of that is the growing trend of converting old church buildings into designer homes and condos. There's barely a town in Massachusetts where you can't find one.

And so it's an honest question: is there any true or lasting relevance to the church today? Are we wasting our time here this morning, when we could be out enjoying the weather or sleeping in? And are we wasting our breath in our effort to tell others about Christ? Is it true, as Progressives tell us today, that for the church to remain relevant it must catch up with the times? Wake up to the realization that people don't believe those things anymore. They're not interested in what traditional Christianity has to offer. If you want to stay relevant in the market, you've got to adjust your product to what people are buying. Help them pursue their dreams and follow their heart. How to live your best life now, wash your face, stop apologizing, and go conquer the world. Is that how we stay relevant?

We have to wrestle honestly with these questions. And I think our passage this morning helps us do that. Because what we're going to see is that, as the apostle Paul brings the gospel to a people who are not looking for Israel's God—they're not Jews, they're not God-fearing Gentiles—they are pagan idolaters, Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, intellectual elites, people for whom news of Israel's God is of little import—*people who aren't shopping for Jesus*—what we're going to see is that the church is most relevant to the world when we proclaim what the world most needs, and yet cannot find anywhere else—true knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007). Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center, *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, May 12, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Lipka, “[A closer look at America's rapidly growing religious 'nones'](#),” *Pew Research Center*, May 13, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Thom Rainer, “[Hope for Dying Churches](#),” *Facts & Trends*, Jan. 16, 2018.

The story itself is part of Paul's second missionary journey. As was his habit, he had been preaching the gospel in the Jewish synagogues, and then among the Gentiles (the non-Jews). But as he had done so in Thessalonica, some of the Jewish leaders decided to try and silence Paul by stirring up trouble and inciting violence. So at the beginning of ch. 17 he gets run out of Thessalonica (17:1-9). And then, after preaching in Berea, some of the Jews from Thessalonica followed him there and did the same thing, such that the believers in Berea sent Paul off on his own, with his companions Timothy and Silas remaining behind (17:10-15). Which brought Paul to Athens, where he is waiting for his companions as our story begins.

And so Paul finds himself some time on his hands, at an unplanned stop on his journey, in a city known for its academic and philosophical elitism. But it's not the history or the philosophy that captures his attention. It's the rampant idolatry. Verse 16: "Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols." What we think of today as breathtaking historical buildings and incredible ancient works of art were in reality temples and images of pagan deities in Paul's day.<sup>6</sup> The city was full of false worship, to false gods, which both robs the true God of his glory, and condemns idolaters to eternal death.

And so Paul does what Paul does. "He reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there" (v. 17). But in Athens it's the marketplace where his message gets the most traction, which is what gives us a window into the true and lasting relevance of the church and its gospel. And there are three observations I want to draw out from this text, along with three applications for us today with respect to the church's relevance. So first, the observations . . .

### **1. Everyone Is Religious**

As Paul is reasoning in the marketplace, "preaching Jesus and the resurrection" (as we're told in v. 18), he captures the attention of some of the philosophical elites of the day—the Epicureans and the Stoics—which lands him an invitation to address one of the most famous forums in philosophical history—the Areopagus, also known as Mars Hill.

The invitation is driven by curiosity (vv. 19-20). It's not that they really wanted what Paul was selling. The Epicureans "considered the gods to be so remote as to take no interest in, and have no influence on, human affairs. The world was due to chance, a random concourse of atoms, and there would be no survival of death, and no judgment. So human beings should pursue pleasure" and avoid pain and fear.<sup>7</sup> Not exactly in convergence with Christianity. Meanwhile the Stoics "acknowledged [a] supreme god, but in a pantheistic way, confusing him with [a] 'world soul.' The world was determined by fate, and human beings must pursue their duty, resigning themselves to live in harmony with nature and reason, however painful this might be, and develop their own self-sufficiency"—again, not exactly in line with Christianity.

But they were intrigued by "this new teaching"—which is apparently all they spent their time doing there. Verse 21: "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new."

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<sup>6</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 349.

<sup>7</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Acts* (BST; Leicester, UK: IVP, 1990), 280.

And so Paul is brought before the Areopagus, for what might be comparable to a guest lecture at a university, or an academic grilling. And notice how he begins his speech in v. 22: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god’” (17:22-23). Paul starts by drawing attention to the widespread religious interest of the Athenians. It’s evident everywhere. And he picks that as a starting point not in order to compliment them for it, as though there’s some intrinsic virtue in being religious even when it’s aimed at the wrong god. No, he acknowledges it because he’s about to correct it. And because it gives him a common point of reference with his audience, a common starting point from which to dialogue. Christianity doesn’t have much in common with paganism or Stoicism or Epicureanism. And he can’t exactly start with the Hebrew Scriptures, like he’s used to doing in the synagogues, since this audience neither knows of nor cares about God’s Word. But an interest in the divine—you can find that anywhere. And so that’s where Paul starts.

And the reality is, whether people want to admit it or not, the same is true today. Everybody is religious. From the Buddhist Monk to the Secular Humanist, from the New Ager to the most ardent Atheist, everyone is looking for God. We obviously don’t always frame it that way, but the reality is that whatever you look for identity in, wherever you place your security, whatever you seek to give you significance or meaning or satisfaction in life—that is your god. It’s what you devote yourself to. It’s what you celebrate and tell others about. It’s what you make sacrifices for. It’s what you defend and advocate for. As humans made in God’s image, we can’t help but be religious beings, built with an innate sense of the divine. As Augustine famously said of God, “You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”<sup>8</sup> Or as a quote often attributed G.K. Chesterton, but originating from a novel by Bruce Marshall, goes, “The young man who rings the bell at the brothel is unconsciously looking for God.”<sup>9</sup> Tim Keller, in his book, *Making Sense of God*, traces an intriguing phenomenon of atheist intellectuals who can’t quite shake the reality of God.<sup>10</sup>

But as religious as humans are, what we worship is often self-made. Whether images of pagan deities, as crafted in the ancient world and in many foreign contexts today, or idols of the heart (things like money, sex, power, or fame), we invest our religious desires in gods of our own making, resulting in a distortion of the true God. And that’s what Paul focuses on next.

## 2. Manmade Religion Distorts God

There is a beer in Japan called Kirin, and the logo on the can is a picture of a traditional, Asian-style, long-necked dragon. But the word *kirin* actually means “giraffe.” So, Giraffe Beer. The story goes that when travelers returned from their adventures abroad and described this long-necked creature of Africa, what people pictured in their minds were dragons. Hence the logo on the can. Without seeing giraffes for themselves, in their effort to reconstruct what they looked like, they ended up with a distortion.

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<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Marshall, *The World, The Flesh, and Father Smith* (Houghton Mifflin, 1945), 108. See <https://www.chesterton.org/other-quotations/>.

<sup>10</sup> See ch. 1 in Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God* (New York: Viking, 2016), 9-28.

The same thing happens with manmade religion. It distorts the true God. We have this sense of the divine, this instinct that there is something greater than us. But because of the limits of our humanity and the fallenness of our sin, we can't find or figure him out on our own. So we simply make stuff up. Create god in our image. But God is not whoever or whatever we want him to be. He is who he is—who he has revealed himself to be in his Word, and ultimately in his Son, Jesus Christ. And he sends his church into the world to bear witness to his true identity—to make the unseen God known.

Look again at v. 23. When Paul makes reference to the altar 'to an unknown God,' he's not complimenting their religious diversity or ingenuity (making sure their bases are covered in case there's some god out there they haven't heard of yet). He's using this as an opportunity to expose their ignorance. "What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." Which is a pretty bold move amid the elite intellectuals of the Areopagus. But manmade religion distorts God. So Paul offers a passionate correction.

First, he explains the true nature of God. Verse 24: "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything" (17:24-25). Manmade religion gets everything backwards. We make god in our image, and treat him dependent on us, which is ultimately so we can control him. But God is the Creator, eternally self-existing and self-sufficient. The sovereign King, the source and sustainer of all life. That's his true nature.

And then in vv. 26-28 Paul clarifies God's true desire relative to humanity—namely, that we would know and worship him as he truly is. Verse 26: "And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him" (17:26-27). God is not regional or territorial; he is cosmic and universal, sovereign over all of human history. And he made humans for relationship with him. He's not distant and uninterested, as the Epicureans thought, or fatalistic and impersonal, as the Stoics thought. Neither is he whatever we want him to be today. He is who he is, and who has revealed himself to be in Jesus Christ. And he made us to know and enjoy him. In fact, as Paul points out, citing their own poets to make his point, "Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring'" (17:27-28). Paul gets his audience. He knows that at this point in the conversation, the Hebrew Scriptures won't carry any weight with them. So he uses their own authors to make the same point Genesis 1 makes—that we are made in the image of God, to be his children (Gen. 1:26-28; cf. 5:1-3).

Which means, he can't stand back and allow his creatures, his children, to continue in ignorance, when what they were made for was an intimate relationship—a relationship they twist and squander and seek to exploit for their own gain. That brings us to the third observation.

### 3. God Will Judge our False Worship

Verse 29:

“Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.<sup>30</sup> The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,<sup>31</sup> because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” (17:29-31)

Paul returns to where he began—with the Athenians’ ignorance of God. As John Stott describes, “The Athenians have acknowledged in their altar inscription that they are ignorant of God, and Paul has been giving evidence of their ignorance. Now he declares such ignorance to be culpable.”<sup>11</sup> Guilty of idolatry, and punishable by divine judgment. Treason against the true Creator and King.

How disrespectful is it to remake God into what we want him to be? It reveals how small our view of God is, how impersonal we think of him. Imagine doing that to your mom. The one who gave birth to you, who raised you, who provided for all your needs. Up in the night consoling you, nurturing you when you get sick, driving you around to all your activities, always reminding you that you’re loved. What would happen, if on your wedding day, your mom shows up at the church, and you don’t acknowledge her as your mom. You don’t even notice her. But more than that, you actually introduce some other lady as your mother, and give her credit for everything your mom did for you. You praise her and thank her and celebrate her before everyone. If you do that, you’re likely to see some unholy wrath come down. When we do that to God, we come under his holy wrath, because he is the author and giver of all of life, the only true God. As he declares in Isaiah 46: “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me” (Isa. 46:9).

In the past, Paul tells the Athenians, that God overlooked this idolatrous ignorance. Which doesn’t mean he ignored it or didn’t care, or that it wasn’t worthy of his judgment. Rather, it means that “in his forbearing mercy he did not visit upon it the judgment it deserved”<sup>12</sup> (cf. Rom. 3:25). And it’s not as though God was completely hidden. As Paul said when he preached among the pagans in Lystra in ch. 14, he has never left himself without a witness (14:17). Rather, as he explains in Romans 1, “For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).<sup>13</sup>

And now the day has been set when God will visit his judgment upon all who reject and distort him. Such that he calls everyone, everywhere to repent of their ignorance and give their worship to the true and only God. From the Athenians of the first century, to every man and woman on earth today. And we can be confident that this is no empty warning, because the one God appointed as judge for that day has been raised from the dead. Jesus, the Savior, is also the judge—and he’s coming again.

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<sup>11</sup> Stott, 287.

<sup>12</sup> Stott, 287.

<sup>13</sup> See Stott, 287.

But it's the mention of the resurrection that brings Paul's speech to a halt (vv. 32-34). That is a category breaker for so many of his listeners. Luke tells us that some reacted with mockery. 'What a stupid idea. Dead people don't come back to life.' Others with continued curiosity. 'We'd like to hear you again on this.' But some responded in faith. They believed in Jesus, and became followers of Christ—which is the whole point of Paul calling out their idolatry and warning them of the judgment to come.

Because the same person who will judge the world in the end, is the one who came first to save it. The same miraculous event that assures us judgment is coming, is at the same time the very power that saves us from that coming judgment—the resurrection of Jesus. God is not whoever or whatever we want him to be; he is who he is, and has revealed himself to us through his Word, and ultimately through his eternal Son, Jesus Christ, who lived, died, and rose again for us. True knowledge of God is only possible through Jesus his Son.

And that brings us to our three points of application.

### **Three Applications**

First, *keep your eyes on Jesus*. Know that whatever it is you're looking for to give you life and meaning and satisfaction, stability, hope, and identity—it is but a shadow of the real thing if it isn't Jesus. We don't have the right to make God whatever we want him to be. He has made himself known to us through Christ. As Paul declares to another Gentile audience in his letter to the Colossians:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. <sup>16</sup> For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things were created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. <sup>19</sup> For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Col. 1:15-20)

You can't improve upon the real thing. There's no substitute. And there's no graduation, as though you start with Jesus and then move on to something bigger. He's the beginning and the end, the Alpha and Omega. Whatever you think you're looking for, whatever your passions are driving you toward, hear in those longings the invitation of Jesus. Keep your eyes on him.

Second, *stay grounded in the church*. Stay grounded in a local church. Is the church relevant today? It's certainly not perfect. We make a mess of things sometimes. And it can be boring—I'm not going to lie. Sometimes, the ministry we're working on or the passage we're looking at doesn't really scratch an itch that I feel. But it's not all about me. I'm not the center; Jesus is. And where else will we find his word of grace? In what other community has God taken up residence, by his Spirit, in a special way? Where else is the Word preached regularly or the sacraments administered? Who else has God called to shepherd the souls of his children? Of course there are missionaries and organizations out preaching God's word and serving people on behalf of Christ—like Paul in our passage. But they do so an extension of local churches who partner together and send them out—like Paul in our passage, sent by the church in Antioch.

The church is not perfect. But it is God’s plan to make himself known in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. And that makes it universally and eternally relevant. Jesus is coming again to judge the living and the dead. And he has called his church to warn the world. To bid the world to flee to Christ for salvation from that judgment. To be reconciled to God, redeemed by the blood of Christ in order to be and do what we were created to be and do—to live as God’s children in an intimate, unending relationship of joy, love, and worship.

Which brings us to our third application. *Get out of the church*—the church building, that is. Keep your eyes on Jesus; stay grounded in the church; and get out of the church in order to make Christ known.

If you want the unbelieving world around us to see the true and lasting relevance of the church, you’re not going to convince them by only participating in more church activities. I’m not saying don’t be involved in discipleship, fellowship, serving, or worship—that’s all part of the life of the church. And it’s a testimony to any non-believers who might come and see. But most people in New England are not going to come and see. We have to go and tell. To love our neighbors as ourselves, and bear witness to Christ in the power of the Spirit.

And we can learn some things from Paul in how we do that. If you’re sharing with someone who grew up in the church and has either left the faith or was never really that interested, you can pretty much just talk about Jesus with them; they know who you’re talking about. But for someone with no church background or concept of the true God, you have to start where they’re at and work your way toward Jesus. If Paul had said to the Athenians, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life,” that would have meant something different to every person listening. He had to start with the basic concept of God first—his nature and plan—in order to work his way to Jesus. He was a master of what’s called “contextualization”—communicating the truth of the gospel in terms and categories that his audience could understand and identify with. It’s really important to know your audience.

But make sure that what you’re offering them is not simply what they want to hear. The church will not retain its relevance simply by parroting the world, or bending our beliefs and practices to what we think people are interested in or will find acceptable. For starters, we’re not going to be able to compete. Because the world will always be able to do worldly stuff better than us. And second, the churches that tried that a hundred years ago are the ones being sold today and turned into condos, while conservative churches tend to flourish.<sup>14</sup>

No, the church is most relevant to the world when we proclaim that which the world needs most *and cannot find anywhere else*—true knowledge of God. That’s what Paul offered in Athens; that’s what we must offer today. The unadulterated gospel of Jesus.

May we be gripped by that gospel, and accept no imitations. May we be changed by that gospel, and become more and more like Christ. And may we hold out that gospel to others, because we love them, because it’s true, and because there’s nothing better we can give them, and nothing they need more desperately, than to know the true God through faith in Jesus.

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<sup>14</sup> See Keller, 24.