

THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL
THE CHURCH ON MISSION
THE GOD WHO SENDS
The Culture: Idolatrous but Intrigued

Today's focus is on Paul's message concerning THE UNKNOWN GOD. The message came to Paul's heart in Athens, Greece. The city was the leading cultural and intellectual center of the western world at the time and yet Paul found it to be an idolatrous culture in more ways than one. During the time of Nero, Athens had over 30,000 public statues. Keep in mind that idolatry involves much more than inanimate objects made by human hands. *Colossians 3:5-6 (ESV)* ⁵ *Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.* ⁶ *On account of these the wrath of God is coming.* When people worship anything besides God and His Son they become idolaters.

The Spirit of God moved in a mighty way in the heart of Paul even in the midst of an idolatrous culture. And we wonder could such a thing still happen today? The answer is 'Yes' as evidenced by the modern-day worship song – God of This City which was birthed by a band in a brothel in Thailand. It happened like this.

The Christian band, Bluetree, of Belfast, Ireland was part of a missions team attending Pattaya Praise. Pattaya is a small coastal town in Thailand which has been built up around the sex industry. There are approximately 30,000 female prostitutes over the age of 18 in the city. Pete Kernoghan of Bluetree said, "It's physically dark; it's spiritually dark, and when I drove in and saw what was going on, I just couldn't see God there at all. We were doing the usual missions stuff; sweeping streets, playing in prisons and a school. But we wanted to play way more. We asked if there was any chance we could get another gig somewhere.... We ended up playing in a bar in the hub of Pattaya's prostitution... It was just a horrendous place. The deal was we could play there for two hours if we brought 30 Christians with us who would all buy *Coca-Cola*, because Coke is more expensive than alcohol there,... We brought 30 of our friends from the conference, and played a two-hour worship set. We did every worship song we knew in the first 20 minutes... So, we went into a time of free worship, and began singing some riffs over the city... 'You're the Lord of this place, You're the King of these people, You're God of this city and greater things are yet to come and greater things are still to be done here.' ... We didn't have that song when we went into that bar, and when we came out, we did." Just like God gave a message to Paul and a song to Bluetree, He will give us the message we need to reach our mission field.

Know the culture and grieve over its idolatry.

Read Acts 17:16 (ESV) 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.*

Paul was filled with a combination of anger and grief. Seeing people spiritually lost, blinded by Satan, and trapped in a pagan culture caused Paul to be in a state of emotional upheaval. Though highly educated, the Athenians were ignorant of the one true God. We are about to see that Paul turned his internal turmoil into positive action.

Evangelism does not start with a heart that just seeks to persuade and win arguments. Evangelism starts with a heart that is broken for lost people. Until our hearts are broken for lost people around us, we will not likely share the gospel.

Affirm the good, rebuke the bad, and proclaim the truth.

Read Acts 17:17-21 (ESV) ¹⁷ *So he reasoned in the synagogue...and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.* ¹⁸ *Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbler wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.* ¹⁹ *And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?"* ²⁰ *For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean."* ²¹ *Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.*

Athens was a city with magnificent buildings and many gods. It was the center of Greek culture, philosophy, and education. One of the most difficult groups to witness to will be educated and successful men and women. Paul was an outstanding worker for Jesus who did not feel that he had to be in a pulpit in order to share the story of Jesus that God had sent him to proclaim. When believers come in contact with 'educated' people with possibly more 'world knowledge' than ourselves, the temptation is to remain silent concerning our faith. Like the Bluetree band, we may not have a clue as to what to say. That is when we need to do what Paul did and what Bluetree did, allow the Holy Spirit to speak through us.

These 'educated people' wiled away their time going over 'new' ideas. **Ecclesiastes 1:9 (ESV)** ⁹ *What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.* For those who are looking for something new, they should consider the words of Jesus in **Revelation 3:12 (ESV)** ¹² *... I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.*

The Epicureans taught that pleasure was the primary goal of life. They denied any meaningful life after death and placed the emphasis on the here and now. Paul would have had nothing in common with these people; yet, he joined in the conversation with a specific purpose. The Stoics believed that human beings should be free from passion, unmoved by joy or grief. Paul's joy came from a life surrendered to God.

These 'men of wisdom' considered Paul a babbler. The word they used for babbler was *spermalogos* meaning 'picking up seed of birds.' They pictured Paul as a "seed picker." These intellectual men also made another

mistake in understanding what Paul was saying. They confused the words for Jesus and the Resurrection. The word Jesus is masculine in gender, Resurrection is feminine – Anastasis. They thought that Jesus (Iesous) and Anastasis (Resurrection) were a god and goddess they hadn't heard about!

Read Acts 17:22-27 (ESV) ²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 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, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 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, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,

Very religious – The truth is a person can be *very religious* and still go to hell! Paul like the modern-day Irish band members met the people where they were. The Athenians had built an idol to the unknown god for fear of missing blessings or receiving punishment. Paul recognized that they were trying to ‘cover all their bases.’ So, that became his starting point. Paul’s opening statement to the men of Athens was about their unknown god. Paul was not endorsing idols, but rather he used the inscription as a ‘conversation opener’ taking the opportunity to reveal the Unknown God to them. Paul explained the one true God to religious men who had no knowledge of Jesus. Today, for most people, God is still unknown and that is where we come in – doing our part to reveal Jesus to those in our world. Paul left us a good example of how to witness to unbelievers. – focus on a person’s interest and then guide them into a conversation on spiritual matters.

Paul began his message with the divine creation and proclaimed to them the God who made the world. I love verse 27: *that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.* Consider it! The God who made the world is not far from us!

Read Acts 17:28-31 (ESV) ²⁸ 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.’” 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. ³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ 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.”

Paul was well prepared to speak to this group. He came from Tarsus, an educational center, and had the training and knowledge to present his beliefs clearly and persuasively. Paul was a rabbi, taught by the finest scholar of his day. We too must be prepared. The more we know about the Bible, what it means, and how to apply it to life, the more convincing our words will be. This does not mean that we should avoid presenting the Good

News until we feel adequate because we will never feel completely adequate. However, since all of us spend hours doing things we love, let's focus more on the things of Jesus.

Paul quoted from the poet Epimenides: "For in Him we live, and move, and have our being." His knowledge helped gain his audience's attention. Then he added a quotation from two poets, Aratus and Cleanthes, "For we are also His offspring." Paul was not saying that all people on earth are the spiritual children of God, since sinners only become God's children by faith in Jesus Christ. He was affirming that we are created in the image of God.

This led to Paul's logical conclusion: God made us in His image, so it is foolish for us to make gods in our own image! Greek religion was nothing but the manufacture and worship of gods who were patterned after men and who acted like men.

Expect some to laugh, some to ask questions, and others to believe.

Read Acts 17:32-34 (ESV) ³² Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." ³³ So Paul went out from their midst. ³⁴ But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Paul drove home his point when he confronted his listeners with Jesus' resurrection and its meaning to all people—either blessing or punishment. Jesus and the Resurrection were not little man-made gods to be put on a shelf. It is Jesus' desire to dwell in our hearts. It was the doctrine of the Resurrection that most refused to accept. Wiersbe says, "To a Greek, the body was only a prison; and the sooner a person left his body, the happier he would be. Why raise a dead body and live in it again? And why would God bother with a personal judgment of each man? This kind of teaching was definitely incompatible with Greek philosophy. They believed in immortality, but not in resurrection."

There were three different responses to the message. Some laughed and mocked and did not take Paul's message seriously. Others were interested but wanted to hear more. A small group accepted what Paul preached, believed on Jesus Christ, and were saved. The more we watch the news, the more we realize that we still need witnesses who will invade our college and university campuses to present Christ to people who are wise in this world but ignorant of the true wisdom of the world to come just like Paul did in Athens. When Bluetree through the Power of the Spirit wrote God of This City, they were thinking of Pattaya. When I sing that song in worship, I think of Jacksonville. Greater things have yet to come. And greater things are still to be done here.