



## ACTS: ENDS OF THE EARTH ACTS 17:16-34

STUDY GUIDE  
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### ACTS 17:16-34 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. 17 So 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. 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. 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, 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." 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.

### STRUCTURE

- I. Paul is provoked toward evangelism in Athens (17:16-17)
  - a. The provocation: idolatry (17:16)
  - b. The response: evangelism amongst both Jews and Gentiles (17:17)
- II. Paul is invited to the Areopagus (17:18-21)
  - a. The confusion: Epicurean and Stoic philosophers question Paul (17:18)
  - b. The curiosity: They wish to know more about this strange teaching (17:19-20)
  - c. The culture: They love to hear new ideas (17:21)
- III. Paul preaches to the largely unreceptive crowd (17:22-31)
  - a. Introduction: Athenian Uncertainty – altar to an unknown God (17:22-23)
  - b. Body:
    - i. God is the Creator of everything, implications (17:24-25)
    - ii. God is the Creator of man, implications (17:26-29)
    - iii. God is the Judge of man, implications (17:30-31a)
  - c. Conclusion: Gospel Certainty – the resurrection of Jesus Christ (17:31b).
- IV. People respond variously to Paul's message (17:32-34)
  - a. Mocking and ambivalence (17:32)
  - b. Faith and commitment (17:33-34)

### GENERAL COMMENTARY:

This is the one story where Paul, by forced necessity, is without a team. He waits for them—but not passively. There's no such thing as an off-duty evangelist. To be ready in season and out of season is to always be on-duty. Our trip to the store is never just a trip to the store; our haircut is never just a haircut; our vacation is never just a vacation. We never cease to be heaven's ambassadors in a foreign land. If our gospel doesn't compel and provoke us toward action, then we are missing something.

This story of Paul's mission differs from the rest because it wasn't planned. Sometimes the Lord's best plans derive from interruptions. They're borne not out of white-board sessions but train wrecks. We plan our course, but the Lord directs our steps (Pr. 16:3).

As for the flow of the story, everything begins with Paul's spiritual provocation. Athens was a city "full of idols," which provoked the apostle's anger. Nevertheless, Paul doesn't start desecrating the Parthenon. He eases in. He finds common ground. He commends them for their devotion and relates to their literature. When he confronts their ideology, he does so in the context of friendship and conversation, not shouting with a megaphone.

Paul's approach with the Greeks differs entirely than his manner with the Jews. Rather than trying to prove from the Scripture that Jesus is the Christ, Paul proclaims biblical truths without even quoting the Bible. Instead, he quotes Greek poets who agree with the Bible. He commends their devotion to false gods without affirming those gods. He walks as far as possible down bridges of commonality before finally spotlighting the contrast—between the Creator and their creation-worship, between the resurrected Christ and their dead idols.

Throughout Paul's message, he spends a lot of time going after idolatry. He attacks the notion that God lives in man-made temples (24) or that God needs man-inspired sacrifices (25). He can't be represented by man-crafted idols (29). All three of Paul's "confrontations" address the very same idolatry that originally provoked him (16). The reason the gospel offends is because it confronts. We're not doing anyone a favor by offering them a gospel without repentance.

If the Jews had rejected Christ on account of their supposed moral superiority, the Greeks rejected Him on account of their supposed intellectual superiority. Kingdom entrance requires that we get small—that we humble ourselves. As Paul writes elsewhere, "Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to the Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Cor. 1:20-25).

Christianity is not the culmination of human philosophy or reasoning. God cannot be found out. The wisdom of Athens proved to be its downfall. Refusing to become fools for Christ, most of Paul's listeners remained only fools.

## **VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:**

***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.***

—"Athens": the most prominent Greek city-state since the fifth century BC. Renowned for democracy and intellectual prowess, especially of the philosophical variety.

—Paul was "waiting"—but not passively. The evangelist never gets a vacation. A good shepherd never says, "Oh well, a sheep is lost, I'll look for it later."

—To be "provoked" carries with it a sense of anger. First Cor. 13:5 is the only other reference to this Greek verb, and it says that love is "not easily provoked." Perhaps "not easily," but it doesn't say "not ever." We should not go around raging over every sin we see in the world. But at some point, righteous anger should be roused. When God's name is dishonored, our hearts should feel "provoked".

—Stott (on the word for "provoked"): "The Greek verb 'paroxyno', from which 'paroxysm' comes, originally had medical associations and was used of a seizure or epileptic fit."

—In the Greek translation of the OT, this word typically depicts God feeling "paroxyno" over Israel's idols. Paul feels like God about rivals to God's throne.

—What idols is our city full of? Paul says elsewhere that "greed" is idolatry. We're very materialistic as a nation. Black Friday proves this to us again every year. What else? Religion is an idol. We place our Christian Culture above God Himself. One evidence of this is that we're mad about homosexual marriage and abortion (as we should be), but we care little about porn, fornication, adultery, and unbiblical divorce/remarriage. In Romans 1:18-32, Paul closely links sexual immorality with idolatry. Idolaters worship images; fornicators worship the image of God—humans beings. Sexual immorality is the height of idolatry. It is body-worship. Another idol is family. We're more concerned with our children becoming scholars and athletes than disciples of Jesus. This is why we drag them all over the city and games all weekend, but we're too busy for God. Family devotionals are replaced with every other activity under the sun. Like Athens, our city is full of idols. Ours are just different.

—Tim Keller: "What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give...A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living."

—Stott: “Although most English versions render it ‘full of idols’, the idea conveyed seems to be that the city was ‘under’ them. We might say that it was ‘smothered with idols’ or ‘swamped’ by them.” Stott adds that one “Roman satirist hardly exaggerates when he says that it was easier to find a god there than a man.”

—I confess that I’m not provoked enough.

—Lord, how can we be more provoked by the idols in our city?

- I’m reminded of the quote by John Piper that introduces his book, *Let the Nations be Glad*: “Missions exists because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.”
- “Missions” appeals are normally driven by compassion for the lost, and rightfully so, but this is secondary. Love for God always precedes love for man. We’ll never sustain compassion for the spiritually lost if we fail to sustain worship. Without a fire for God’s honor, we’ll remain dispassionate about evangelism.
- If we are not provoked by idols, it is because we have a worship problem. Worship is more than singing songs on Sunday. It is a life wholly devoted to God’s honor (Rom. 12:2). When I live chiefly for God’s glory, I am jealous of rivals. We’ll feel as if a “third party” has encroached upon our marriage covenant. Our covenant with God is sacred and eternal, and we should jealously seek His honor above all. The test for whether God’s honor is foremost in our hearts is—how much do idols provoke us?
- Stott: “Now jealousy is the resentment of rivals, and whether it is good or evil depends on whether the rival has any business to be there. To be jealous of someone who threatens to outshine us in beauty, brains or sport is sinful, because we cannot claim a monopoly of talent in those areas. If, on the other hand, a third party enters a marriage, the jealousy of the injured person, who is being displaced, is righteous, because the intruder has no right to be there. It is the same with God, who says, ‘I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols.’”

—This was the most important city in the world, just a short time before. Its architecture and sculptures would have wowed any visitor. But Paul’s spirit was grieved because the beauty was polluted with idolatry.

**17 So 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.**

—“discuss, reason, argue, talk” – these are all translations for “reasoned”. It means to disagree with, but not primarily through sermon; rather, through conversation.

—“every day”: we should endeavor to be everyday evangelists. If we happen to see zero spiritually lost people that day, we should aim to make that kind of day less frequent. And we should at least pray for them on those occasions.

—“happened to be there”: I’ve heard many people talk about ‘friendship evangelism.’ It’s an important form of evangelism, but it’s not enough. Once the church becomes your community, you lose a lot of your non-Christian connections. You have to be an everyday evangelist by sharing with strangers a lot. Father, help me.

—“synagogue... marketplace”:

- Paul had an “in” in the synagogue. The marketplace—not so much, but he made one.
- Where do you have an “in” with the spiritually lost?
- What is today’s marketplace? One is social media. People are surprisingly willing to go instantly deep on social media in ways they never would in casual conversation.

**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.**

—Athens’ best days were behind her, but she still would’ve been viewed as the intellectual capital of Rome and the religious capital of Greece. Philosophers roamed the streets and dialogued with random visitors. What an interesting dynamic.

—“Epicurean and Stoic philosophers”:

- “Epicurean”: pursued pleasure as the chief purpose in life and valued most of all the pleasure of a peaceful life, free from pain, disturbing passions, and superstitious fears (including the fear of death). They did not deny the existence of gods but believed that they had nothing to do with man.

- "Stoic": pantheists who put great emphasis on moral sincerity and a high sense of duty. They cultivated a spirit of proud dignity and believed that suicide was better than a life lived with less dignity. The Stoics believed that everything was God, and God was in everything. They believed that all things, good or evil, were from "god," and so nothing should be resisted. They saw no direction or destiny for mankind.
- Also, Epicureans would've stressed God's transcendence (He is above and beyond us), while Stoics would've stressed God's immanence (He is near to us). Paul's message and the message of the Gospel do both. God is greater than creation, yet He became incarnate in Jesus and drew near to us.

—"Jesus and the resurrection": the resurrection is never just "one among Christian doctrines." It's THE central Christian doctrine. Everything hinges upon it.

**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.**

—"Areopagus":

- The Areopagus was a hill located just west of the Acropolis in Athens, named after Ares, the Greek god of war. The name Areopagus means "Ares' Rock" in Greek, referencing the hill's association with the god Ares, who was said to have been tried here by the gods for the murder of Poseidon's son, Halirrhothius.
- The Roman name for "Ares" was "Mars" (Roman god of war). Therefore, the Romans referred to this location as "Mars Hill," as some English translations render it.
- The Areopagus was more than just a physical location; it was also the name of the council of elders who met there. This council was one of the most important governing bodies in Athens for centuries.
- Over time, the Areopagus became a place for intellectual discussion, particularly for philosophers and thinkers. Philosophers would often debate important ideas about ethics, politics, and the nature of the gods. It was a center for the exchange of ideas in a city known for its intellectual and artistic achievements.
- While in the context of Acts 17, the Areopagus is depicted as a place of philosophical and spiritual inquiry, it still held judicial authority, which might explain the formal nature of the invitation for Paul to address the council. It wasn't just a casual conversation; this was a legal and intellectual tribunal, which carried significant weight in Athens.

—"new teaching": We are always hearing about a new diet. Or a new exercise plan. Or a meditation craze. Or a medication craze. Or a borrowed Hindu ritual. Or a new way of viewing homosexuality and marriage. We are "secular," but not much different. Like Athens, we are always looking for something new.

—"foreigners who lived there": Athens was a global city and consequently had lots of different worldviews to discuss.

—When you haven't discovered the truth, you're always looking for a new angle on life; once you've discovered the truth, you know that there's "nothing new under the sun" (Ecc. 1:9).

—Lord, help us avoid the human search for the next big thing that will lead us to health, wealth, and happiness. You have already provided grace in abundance.

**22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.**

—He begins by commending them, by finding common ground. Provocation has driven him here, but his speech is polite, not angry.

—This would be similar to a Christian commending a Muslim for his prayerful devotion. How can Paul do this, knowing their "religious" efforts honored false deities—demons (Deut. 32:17; 1 Cor. 10:20)? In time, he will address God's judgment, but he doesn't start there. He builds a bridge. Likewise, we should not start with God's wrath and judgment. "Repent or go to hell" is not the best conversation-starter.

**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.**

—Paul observed the city. He didn't just pass by. He studied their countless altars. Likewise, it is not enough for us to be students of Scripture; we must be students of culture. What music are people listening to? What movies are they watching? What books are they reading? What podcasts are they downloading?

What art do they celebrate? Which injustices anger them, and which ones do they pass over? If we have no clue how to answer these questions, it will be difficult to bridge gospel conversations.

—The Athenians didn't want to overlook any deities and thereby dishonor them. This shows not just their religiousness but their uncertainty. Paul will gradually move them from the uncertainty of what they don't know to the certainty of what can be known: Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

—Where is the uncertainty in our culture? For the lover of science, perhaps it's the uncertainty of how things began or why they're so orderly. For the philosopher, perhaps it's the presence of moral values. For the everyday person, perhaps it's what happens after we die or where we find our identity or how to get free from an addiction. Christianity offers a certain solution on all these nagging dilemmas.

***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.***

—Paul teaches that God is the Creator, but he also goes further than this. He corrects the fundamental misunderstanding of idolaters: that God is a Taker, not a Giver. The only reason someone values something else above God is that they think that 'thing' will give them more and that the true God will take from them. But make no mistake: these 'gods' requires sacrifice. Jesus is the lone God who sacrificed Himself. Salvation is a gift. God is the True Giver. Idols "give"—a high, an escape, a fleeting transcendence—but they always swipe the rug away, crashing the fragile shell that remains at rock bottom.

—I'm reminded of the quote by the late (non-Christian) David Foster Wallace: "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship... is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. If you worship your body and beauty and sexual allure, you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. If you worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. If you worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out."

—God alone is the great Giver who "gives to all mankind life and breath and everything."

—The Epicureans would have denied God as a Creator, instead emphasizing random chance; the Stoics would have denied God as Creator, instead blending the distinction between Creator/creation, making everything into a singular god.

—"temples made by man... served by human hands":

- This phrasing reminds us of Stephen's speech in Acts 7: "And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands... Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?'" (7:41, 48-50).
- A contrast the work of God's hands and man's hands is a theme in Scripture:
  - [Dan 2:34-36 ESV] 34 As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. 35 Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. 36 "This was the dream. Now we will tell the king its interpretation.
  - [Mar 14:58 ESV] 58 "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'"
  - [2Co 5:1 ESV] 1 For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.
  - [Heb 9:11, 24 ESV] 11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ... 24 For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.
- Comment on Dan. 2: The stone that struck the image was Jesus (cf. Lk. 20:17-18), and the image was the kingdoms of this world. The stone was made without hands because Jesus is God. He is

also our new temple (cf. John 1:14; 2:19; etc.). As such, He becomes a “mountain” that fills the whole earth. The mountain and the temple were so closely related as to be one in the Jewish mind (Isa. 2:1-3; Micah 4:1-2).

- Comment on Mark 14: This statement was made by “false witnesses” (14:57), but Jesus says this in another passage (John 2:19-21). It could be that He was talking about the temple of his body, as in John 2, but they construed it to be that He was talking about the literal structure. The same misunderstanding occurred in John 2.
- Comment on 2 Cor. 5:1: Paul speaks of our future resurrection bodies as a sort of eternal temple that replaces this temporary tent of our decaying bodies (cf. 2 Cor. 4:16-18). This suggests that our bodies are more like portable tabernacles now, but one day they will be like a permanent temple. Paul emphasizes that our resurrection bodies will be “made without hands” to emphasize their perfection and permanence, however our current bodies are also made without hands. This is why some interpreters (a minority) understand the “building from God” to speak of the New Heavens and New Earth (cf. Rev. 21), not our human bodies. They make a good point, but the prior context is about human bodies.
- Comment on Heb. 9:11, 24: Heaven is a sort of temple, which Jesus entered as our Great High Priest to apply the sacrifice of His blood. Again, it is made without human hands and is thus perfect.

—What do we do with all these verses about God’s true temple being made without human hands in contrast to human temples—both Jewish and pagan—being made with human hands? Paul states the significance: “nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (17:25). God is the giver of life. It is preposterous to imagine that the All-Sufficient One lives on the fuel of human service or the incense of human worship. It is equally preposterous to think that the Creator of all needs us to create idols and temples for Him.

—Idolatry worships creation due to ignorance of the Creator. The Creator alone is independent, meaning that He alone requires no fuel to sustain Him or prop to hold Himself up. The Creator alone is infinite in time (eternal) and space (omnipresent). As such, He cannot be confined by sacred times and spaces nor reduced to the finite dimensions of an idol. God alone—independent and infinite—gives to creation from His never-ending supply. Therefore, He alone is worthy of worship.

—We worship God not in order to sustain Him; rather, worship sustains us—eternally. We worship Him first out of love and second out of duty.

***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, 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."***

—“made from one man every nation”:

- Adam was a real man. Genesis 1-3 is not fiction.
- If we all came from the same man, then we all belong to the same race, the human race. To judge one another based on appearances is like hating your own siblings. We all come from the same source—Adam. Behind him, we all come from God.

—“to live on all the face of the earth”—not just Israel. From the beginning, God intended mankind to scatter, be fruitful, multiply, and take dominion until the whole world looked like God ruled over it. We, His image bearers, were to rule as He rules. However, our ancestors gathered at Babel and did not scatter until God judged them. Ever since, the nations have worshiped false gods, which brings us to this present scene.

—“having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place”:

- Deut. 32:8-9: “When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. But the LORD’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage.”
- Deuteronomy 32 says that God gave not just Israel but also “the nations their inheritance”. This occurred after the Tower of Babel when God scattered them. Deuteronomy adds that the false gods of the nations (“the sons of God”—a reference to a council of spiritual beings) have been allotted to the nations, but Yahweh took Israel as His own portion.
- To help explain this idea of “false gods” represented by a council of spiritual beings, here is a portion of commentary I wrote on Ps. 82, which addresses the same: “Any ancient Israelite reading Psalm 82 believed that Israel’s God, Yahweh, presided over a “divine council” (v. 1) of “gods”—spiritual beings—some of which were righteous, and some wicked. These “gods” were also called “sons of God” throughout the Old Testament, or “sons of the Most High” in Psalm 82:6. As Dr.

Michael Heiser contends, these “sons of God” were labeled such because God has two families: one human and one non-human. He created both to rule the earth but in different spheres. The non-human “divine council” members were to rule the earth from above, while man ruled from below. Together, we would submit to God’s commission to bring the earth under God’s perfect rule—on earth as it is in heaven. Unfortunately, just like God’s earthly children, some of His spiritual children—the “sons of God”—also rebelled (see Gen. 6). At Babel, God responded to His rebellious earthly children by handing them over to His rebellious spiritual children. This explains why, outside of Israel, the nations worshiped false gods. In Jewish thinking, their false gods were not just fairy tales. They were fallen members of the divine council. They were demons. When the nations rejected the one true God at Babel, he handed them over to “the gods” as a form of judgment.”

- Paul would have approached Athens with this worldview in mind. This city full of idols owed its origin to Babel. God scattered the nations, allotting them territories and false gods to worship (as judgment). But “now” the time is up. He who once judged the nations has now graced them in Jesus Christ. God never intended to inherit just a tiny plot of land in the Middle East. Even from his first promise to Abram—that “all the families of the earth” would be blessed through his posterity (Gen. 12:3)—the world was in view. This explains why Paul refers to Abram as “heir of the world” (Rom. 4:13) through faith. The earth does not belong to false gods or the nations who worship them. The earth belongs to the One who said, “All authority in heaven and on earth belongs to me” (Matt. 28:18). Jesus is taking over the world—not by usurpation but by redemption.

—“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”

- Deuteronomy tells us that God allotted the nations their territories and false gods, which seems to indicate that God had given up on the nations. Paul clarifies. In handing the nations over to their false gods, the One True God never ceased wanting to be found—even making provisions for the nations to find Him. In Acts 14:17, Paul says to the pagans of Lystra, *“Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”*
- Rom. 1:18-25 indicates that God bore witness through creation to all people about His eternal reality. Everyone has enough evidence to believe in God.
- Paul begins to approach the subject of relationship. God created us so that we would move “toward Him and find Him.” God is spatially close to all of us, but He wants to be relationally close to us. This is unlike the any of these Greek idolaters would have expected. For them, it was either about sacrificing to a distant god or succumbing to the capriciously decided fate of the gods.

—Paul again finds common ground by quoting their poets. They won’t look to Scripture, but they will look to natural revelation and human literature for a source.

—The poets Paul quotes are from Epimenides (600 B.C.) and Aratus (310 B.C.) respectively.

—In terms of redemption, only those who place faith in Jesus are God’s “offspring.” In terms of creation, we are all God’s offspring. Like Seth was made in the image of Adam his father (Gen. 5:3), we are all made in the image of God our Father.

—Paul quotes the two poets to prove his point that God is not far from us. First, He is not far from us because our every breath derives from him—He is closer than the oxygen in our lungs. Second, He is not far from us because He is our Father—He is not just a distant creative energy but a doting Dad.

—What are some of the messages in our culture that we might employ as bridges for gospel conversations with people who hold radically different worldviews?

- To a pro-choice picketer: Despite our deep differences, can we build a bridge based on our common belief in the value of women and passion for justice? Indeed, God created men and women both in His image, and God is a God of justice.
- To an LGBTQ activist: Despite our deep differences, can we build a bridge based on our common belief in the worth of all people—made in the image of God and pursued through Christ in the gospel?
- Similar bridges can be built with environmentalists (God made us to steward creation), humanists (we both value human flourishing), New Age seekers (we both value spirituality), atheistic scientists (we both value truth and matter), etc.

**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."***

—Ignorance is not something that will be excused on the day of judgment. Nobody will be able to say, "But I didn't know!" No, "all people everywhere" will answer to this very same God who created all things and allotted our time and place of living.

—In what sense had "God overlooked" the former "times of ignorance"?

- At first glance, this might seem to indicate that God did not judge the ignorance of pagans before Jesus. But this would violate the message of the prophets who routinely condemned the pagans. It would have rendered Jonah's preaching at Nineveh superfluous.
- We find a hint of Paul's meaning in his sermon in Acts 14:16: "In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways..." Pairing this with its parallel here in 17:30, Paul is saying, "God exercised tremendous patience with the nations that worshiped idols before the coming of Christ by letting them fill up the measure of their sins rather than smiting them all immediately." Then Paul emphasizes the stark contrast with two words—"BUT NOW". Before, God let the nations go after their godless desires BUT NOW He demands they repent with urgency. He will no longer tolerate their wicked worship because Jesus changed everything."
- Jesus changed everything by defeating the devil on the cross and effectively "un-deceiving" the nations that had been handed over to their false gods at Babel. Now the nations, like Israel of old, are flooded with gospel light through the witness of a Spirit-baptized church. Truth illuminates the nations because Yahweh inherited not just Israel, as in the Old Testament, but now the whole world (Matthew 28:18). From Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), good news shines forth "unhindered" (28:30) because Satan is "cast out" (Jhn. 12:31)— "bound" (Rev. 20:2)—from weaving his spell over Gentiles. See the fuller quotation of John 12:31-32: "**Now** is the judgment of this world; **now** will the **ruler of this world be cast out**. And I, **when I am lifted up** from the earth, will **draw all people** to Myself." At the Cross, Jesus conquered the devil to "un-deceive" the nations, flooding them with gospel light through witnesses like Paul in Acts 17.

—"fixed a day": Judgment Day is not a maybe; it is a certainty.

—"judge the world in righteousness": God's standard is His perfect moral character.

—"by a man whom he has appointed": God is the Judge of All, but He has entrusted judgment to the Son in keeping with His Triune nature: the Father is the first Person of the Trinity, and the Son is the second Person. As we read in John 5:22-23, "The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him."

—Jesus is God, but He also forever remains a "man".

—"of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead": The leaders of Athens brought him to Mars Hill to explain "Jesus and the resurrection" more fully. After building multiple gospel bridges, establishing commonality, the apostle concludes where it all began. The resurrection of our Lord confirms that He indeed will judge the whole world.

—The speech that began with common ground now reaches the point of separation. We can only build gospel bridges so far. We are not universalists (claiming automatic salvation for all). Everyone must repent—inwardly turning from sin and idols to serve the Living God.

—Paul went from knowing who God is (our Creator), to who we are (His offspring), to our responsibility before Him (to understand Him and worship Him in truth), to our accountability if we dishonor Him (judgment).

***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.***

—This is a common response to the gospel: mocking.

—To follow Christ in this case meant to join Paul. No church was planted in Athens. So they joined Paul's team and went with him. Christianity can't be separated from Christians anymore than we can decapitate our Lord and Savior. He will not be separated from His body. To join yourself to Christ is to join yourself to His body, the church.

—Where there is not a proper readiness to search out the truth (as in Berea), there will not be many converts.