

## **Building Bridges, Not Barriers**

Acts 17:16-34

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Last weekend, Pastor Ed and Sheila, Gary and Kathy Pinger, and Beth and I had the privilege of attending the Keep Believing Ministries retreat. KBM is one of Edgewood's Go Team Partners. One of the many highlights was learning how the free gospel book, *Anchor for the Soul* has now been distributed in all 50 states! The only state we were missing was Rhode Island but an order from a homeless shelter came in on the day we began our retreat. To date, over 800,000 copies have been given away to prisons, pregnancy centers, homeless shelters, and other outreach ministries. Gary and Kathy ship these books out of a Moline storage facility.

Didn't Justin Rumley do a great job preaching last weekend? What a super reminder of how the sufficiency and supremacy of Christ meets us at the point of our insufficiency.

[I'm grateful to Ray Pritchard for this idea]. *Imagine you are a missionary arriving in the capital city of a country you have never been to before. Your itinerary was suddenly changed and now you find yourself alone in a place filled with people whose education and intelligence surpasses your own. The city is filled with people discussing art, debating philosophy, and describing the latest fads.*

*You are the first Christian to ever visit this city. There are no churches, no Christian schools, and no Moody Radio. As you walk down the streets, you become nauseated by the sheer number of statues to pagan gods, and you begin weeping because no one has even heard of Jesus.*

*What will you do? How will you find an opening for the gospel? Where will you begin? How will you find someone to talk to? And who will even listen to your message?*

This is precisely the situation the Apostle Paul faced when he arrived in Athens. Listen as I read Acts 17:16-21: ***“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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Some of the***

*Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, ‘What does this babbling wish to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities’ – because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.<sup>19</sup> And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?’<sup>20</sup> For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.’<sup>21</sup> Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.”*

Two weeks ago, we learned this truth from the first part of Acts 17: “To turn the world upside down, the Word must first turn us inside out.” Our main point today is this: *If we’re going to reach unbelievers with the gospel, we must build bridges, not barriers.*

## Background

The Apostle Paul had to bounce out of Berea because of persecution so he made a 200-mile journey to Athens where he waited for Silas and Timothy. To pass the time, he went sightseeing. Instead of being impressed with what he saw, verse 16 says, *“his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.”*

The phrase *“full of idols”* means they were covered with, or *“under”* idols. There were gobs of gods everywhere. One ancient writer estimated there were 30,000 gods in the city, making it easier to bump into an idol than an individual. Athens was next to Mount Olympus where the Greek gods Zeus and Aphrodite supposedly hung out. In addition, the Parthenon, a temple dedicated to the goddess Athena, was built on the highest hill overlooking the city.

The Greek word for *“provoked”* is where we get the word *“seizure”* from. It has the idea of being so morally shocked his insides convulsed. It’s a combination of anger and sadness. Paul was deeply distressed about the depth of their depravity. Jesus had a similar reaction when seeing the hardness of the people of Jerusalem in Luke 19:41: *“And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it.”* It’s how Lot felt in 2 Peter 3:7 when he was: *“greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked.”*

When I was working on this very part of the sermon, I took a break to scroll through my news feed. I came across a story out of Vermont which made me feel sick to my stomach. During halftime at a recent high school football game, many

students and teachers went onto the field and celebrated sin in front of a cheering crowd. As the show came to an end, the school superintendent participated with the performers on the track.

Here's what I wrote down a couple months ago: That which is an ABOMINATION used to lead to LAMENTATION but is now a CELEBRATION because the UNTHINKABLE has become UNQUESTIONABLE.

Leonard Ravenhill once said: *"The world has lost its power to blush over its vice; the church has lost her power to weep over it."*

Instead of leaving the city or complaining to the officials, verse 17 tells us Paul first preached in the synagogue and then built bridges with those in the marketplace daily.

Men like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Sophocles were from Athens. We see in verse 18 two groups of philosophers wanted to debate with him.

- The **Epicureans** were atheists; they denied God's existence and the afterlife. They were content to just live for today. Their chief goal was the pursuit of pleasure, and their deepest desire was the avoidance of pain. Their motto was, *"Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die."* Do you know any Epicureans in the area?
- The **Stoics** were pantheists who believed everything was God and God was in everything. Stoics strived to live in harmony with nature, focusing on self-control and self-sufficiency. Their attitude toward life was one of ultimate resignation. Their motto was, *"Grin and bear it."* Apathy was regarded as the highest virtue in life. Do you know anyone just going through the motions?

Some of these proud philosophers treated Paul with utter disdain. The word **"babbling"** is literally a *"seed-picker."* They saw him as one of the little birds in the marketplace flitting around pecking at seeds here and there. In their minds, Paul was a contemptible chatterer, a collector of fragments of truth.

But others were interested and wanted to know more about **"this new teaching"** so they brought him to the Areopagus, the highest court in Athens. Their theology had room for additional gods. That reminds me of a Hindu I talked to some time ago. He told me he believes in many different gods, and it would be easy to just

add Jesus to the list. I told him it doesn't work that way because Jesus is the only way to Heaven. He quickly changed the subject.

Athens was filled with idols *and* ideas. Things haven't changed much, have they? John Calvin nailed it when he said, "*The human heart is an idol factory...every one of us from our mother's womb is an expert in inventing idols.*"

In particular, the Athenians spent "***their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.***" In essence, they were into fads. A fad is something people are interested in for a short period of time, only to have something new get their attention. Examples from our past include Pet Rocks, Cabbage Patch Kids, and Beanie Babies. For the Athenians, if something was trending on Twitter, popular on Tik Tok, a viral video on You Tube, the milk crate challenge on Instagram, or the most viewed show on Netflix, they were all over it.

Sadly, the Greeks had 800 years of Greek mythology and 500 years of Greek philosophy and they were still searching for something novel to bring satisfaction to their souls. Eric Hoffer writes, "*The fear of becoming a 'has been' keeps some people from becoming anything.*"

As we walk through our text, I want us to see Paul's approach as a model for us as we live on mission with the intelligent, atheistic, pleasure-seeking, self-sufficient and apathetic people in our own lives. His words are clear, concise, and very much to the point.

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While the Epicureans were all about enjoying life, the Stoics focused on enduring life. Let's learn how Paul pointed them to eternal life. This is really a fulfillment of Paul's purpose given by Jesus in Acts 9:15: "***He is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings.***"

I see six ways we can build gospel bridges with unbelievers.

**1. Compliment what you can.** We see this in verse 22: "***So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.'***" Don't miss this. Paul was repulsed by all their idols and their ideas, but he was respectful! What he saw nauseated him, but he didn't get nasty with people.

What a great approach. He didn't denounce them or attack their idolatry. In fact, he paid them a compliment. He basically said, "*As I've been walking around your city, I've noticed one thing about you: You are a very religious people.*" He didn't begin by saying, "*I've come to expose your sins, you dirty, wretched, hell-bound, idol-worshipping, heathenistic pagans.*"

Do you look for ways to compliment those who are not yet Christians? Or are you secretly angry with them because of their behavior? Write this down. We should never be surprised when non-Christians act like non-Christians. Remember to be kind, not cold and abrasive. Unbelievers will pick up on our attitudes, so we need to be careful. Let's make sure we're building bridges, not burning them.

One pastor put it like this: "*If you're not filled with indignation, you will not have courage to do what Paul did; and if you only have indignation, you won't have the gentleness that you need.*"

Let's take this to a deeper level. With all the cultural chaos, decadent depravity, and societal sins swirling around us, it's difficult to respond redemptively, isn't it? As I see it, we have four choices.

- **Isolate.** At times in church history, the world was so wicked some believers retreated to monasteries and others went to even more extremes to unplug from the world around them.
- **Insulate.** It's not easy to isolate so others choose to insulate themselves from the problems and pain of those who don't yet know Christ. These people spend almost all their time with other Christians and when they do have conversations about lost people their words are often judgmental.
- **Imitate.** I'm afraid this is where most believers end up. Instead of fighting the world, this person just wants to fit in and ends up caving into the culture.
- **Infiltrate.** This is the heart of Jesus. As light, we're to expose darkness and point people to the light of the world. As salt, we're to function as a preservative in society and make people thirsty for Jesus. One of my pastor friends put it like this: We must stop thinking "us vs. them" and move toward "us *for* them."

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**2. Connect to a need.** Notice verse 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.'*" The word "*observed*" means, "*to behold attentively.*" They erected an altar to an "*unknown god*" because they didn't want to inadvertently miss one. This showed Paul they had a deep desire to please God, even if they didn't know who He was. In effect, he said, "*You admit you don't know this God so let me tell you about Him.*" The God they thought was hidden, was the God Paul openly proclaimed to them.

Paul hung out where people lived and worked. This is a key principle, isn't it? You've got to get to know people if you want to build a gospel bridge to them.

As Paul walked around, he looked for connect points, or bridges, from their world to the gospel. In missions, these are called "redemptive analogies," which are cultural or traditional beliefs the missionary can use as a springboard to explain the gospel message.

One of the best books on missions I've ever read is called, *Peace Child* by Don Richardson. As a missionary to the cannibalistic, headhunting Sawi tribe of Irian Jaya, he struggled to find a way to communicate the gospel message. The villages constantly fought among themselves, and because revenge and murder were highly honored, there seemed to be no hope of peace. The tribe, however, had a legendary custom that if one village gave a baby boy to another village, peace would prevail between the two villages as long as the child lived. This baby was called a "peace child."

Richardson used this connect point to help them see Jesus as God's "Peace Child." Because He lives eternally His peace will never end. This redemptive analogy was the key which unlocked the gospel for the Sawis. In a miraculous working of the Holy Spirit many came to faith in Christ, and a strong, evangelistic church launched.

Brothers and sisters, are you spending enough time with your neighbors, classmates, or co-workers to find these connect points? Do you know what their interests are? Do you know what they are concerned about? Do you know what makes them happy and what makes them sad? Have you discovered any idols in their hearts?

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**3. Clearly present God.** Notice how bold Paul was in verse 23: ***“What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”*** This probably made them sit on the edge of their stone seats. The phrase ***“worship as unknown”*** literally means ***“in ignorance.”*** It’s as if he was saying, ***“You admit there is a God you don’t know. I happen to know that God and I will now proclaim Him to you.”***

In verses 24-27, Paul taught a Theology 101 class: ***“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.”*** <sup>26</sup> ***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,*** <sup>27</sup> ***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.”***

In the midst of multiple gods, Paul quickly contrasts the true God with their innumerable idols when he says, ***“The God...”*** There’s only one God. Isaiah 45:5: ***“I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God.”*** Paul begins with what is called “theology proper” in verses 24-25.

- God is the creator of everything: ***“who made the world and everything in it.”***
- God is Lord of all: ***“being Lord of heaven and earth.”*** God is supreme and sovereign.
- God cannot be contained in a building: ***“does not live in temples made by man.”*** Solomon knew this to be true according to 1 Kings 8:27: ***“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!”*** This would have been a jolt to them in the shadow of the Parthenon.
- God does not need anything from anyone: ***“nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything.”***
- God sustains His creation: ***“since He himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.”***

In verses 26-27, Paul transitions into theological anthropology.

- The entire human race can be traced to Adam. Every nation of mankind comes from one man. In that sense, there is only one race, which is the human race: ***“and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live***

*on all the face of the earth.*” Paul is confronting the racism of the Greeks, who called everyone who could not speak Greek “barbarians.” No nation or race is superior because we all came from one ancestor.

- God determines the time and place for every individual and every nation: *“having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.”*
- God put within us a desire to know Him: *“that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward Him and find Him.”* Ecclesiastes 3:11 says God *“has put eternity into man’s heart.”*

God exists. He’s the Creator. He is supreme and sovereign. He is involved. He sustains. And He is drawing you to Himself. One pastor put it like this:

- *You didn’t make God; He made you.*
- *He doesn’t need you; you need Him.*
- *He’s looking for you; even when you’re not looking for Him.*

Then, Paul circles back to making a cultural connection when he quotes two of their pagan poets before again establishing the uniqueness of God: *“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.’”* In our culture, it would be like using a line from a current movie or a lyric from a top song.

Paul then bridges to biblical truth: *“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.”* As Paul was saying this, his listeners were no doubt gazing at the gods and the costly statues displayed on the Acropolis.

**4. Call for repentance.** Paul compliments, connects, and clearly presents God. Then, he calls for repentance. Listen to verse 30: *“The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent.”*

In our country’s sentimental spirituality and easy believism, I fear the evangelical church has stopped preaching repentance. We must reclaim this important doctrine because it’s a command. Listen to what was said about Jesus in Matthew 4:17: *“From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”* Acts 3:19 says, *“Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out.”*



**5. Clarify who Christ is.** It's not enough to just compliment and connect. We must clearly present God and call for repentance. Then, because there is so much confusion about Christ, we must clarify who He is. Look at verse 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.”***

This is really a short course on Christology with two main headings.

- Everyone will face the judgment of Jesus. The day of judgment is fixed and inescapable. John 5:22: ***“For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son.”*** Hebrews 9:27 says, ***“And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.”*** Interestingly, this is the order of biblical revelation – it begins with creation and ends with judgment.
- Jesus has been raised from the dead. The resurrection is proof Jesus is God and He is alive. He has conquered depravity, death, and the devil himself.

Paul hit on sin, righteousness, and judgment because according to John 16:8 that's how the Holy Spirit brings conviction: ***“And when He comes, He will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.”***

Paul was not afraid to speak of an inescapable day of judgment. He did not shrink from speaking the truth about the resurrection of Jesus, even though he knew many of his listeners would not want to hear it. He celebrated the supremacy of Christ and didn't shy away from speaking about sin.

Let me say it succinctly so you don't miss it. You will either face Jesus as Judge, or you will face Him as Justifier. You will either be condemned because of your sins, or you'll be commended because the Savior has forgiven your sins. You'll either go to Heaven because Jesus has taken on your curse, or you will be cursed forever in a hot place called Hell. Romans 6:23: ***“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”***

As God gives you opportunity, speak boldly for Christ. Be unashamed. Tell people how Jesus died in their place, and how they can be forgiven for all the sins they have committed. Call them to repentance in light of the resurrection because judgment is coming.

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There's one final element in Paul's connecting strategy...

**6. Commit the results to God.** I see three responses which are still very common today. Let me remind you we're not responsible for how people respond.

- **Some rejected.** We see this in verse 32: *“Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked...”* The word **“mock”** means they *“sneered and derided.”* When they heard about the resurrection, they rejected it.
- **Others were reluctant.** A second response is found in the last part of verse 32: *“We will hear you again about this.”* Their appetites were whetted, and they told Paul they wanted to talk some more. Unfortunately, this response often amounts to procrastination where the individual keeps putting off a decision to repent and receive Christ. One commentator said this: *“The most dangerous of all days is when a man discovers how easy it is to talk about tomorrow.”* That's why the Bible says today is the day of salvation.
- **A few received.** Verse 34 says: *“some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.”* It's often just a few who will be convinced. Many will reject. Some will be reluctant. A handful will receive.

The gospel wasn't well received in Athens, but that's not Paul's fault. Regardless of how someone responds, it's our responsibility to do what we can to connect them to Christ. Our job is to simply sow the seed of the gospel. As far as we know, no church was launched because of Paul's preaching. In fact, this is the first and last time Athens is mentioned in Scripture.

As we summarize what we've learned, in an effort to personalize these points, I'd like you to think of one person you know who is not yet saved. Put their face on the screen of your mind.

- Compliment what you can.
- Connect to a need.
- Clearly present God.
- Call for repentance.
- Clarify who Christ is.
- Commit the results to God.

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## **Action Steps**

**1. Repent and receive Christ.** If you're not yet saved, make today your day of salvation.

**2. Look for opportunities to connect with non-Christians.** One of the members of our Growth Group on Wednesday night shared how she is asking God to help her be more intentional in sharing the gospel. After she shared a recent experience, I thanked her for helping to sharpen the rest of us. She smiled and said, *"Why would I not? He saved me."*

Increasingly, you and I are living in a foreign land. We are aliens and strangers, but we're also called to live on mission. God has given you neighbors to love and witness to. You live where you live by design. He put you in the place you're in on purpose for His purposes.

To say it another way, see yourself as a missionary cleverly disguised as a student, or a waitress, an electrician, engineer, parent, grandparent, receptionist, plumber, realtor, driver, construction worker, accountant, nurse, med tech, or senior citizen.

Sometimes people ask me where Edgewood is located. I often tell them Edgewood is scattered throughout the Quad Cities and on the continents through our Go Team partners...and weekly we gather on 38<sup>th</sup> Street in Rock Island!

We want to end today by hearing from an Edgewood member who is being called to serve cross-culturally in a hard place. Just as Paul had to learn the culture of the Athenians, she will eventually arrive in a foreign place. She'll compliment what she can as she seeks to connect with needs. She's determined to clearly present God, to call for repentance, and clarify who Christ is, committing all the results to Him. Church, have the joy of following the model in the Book of Acts as we send her out to live on mission for the glory of God.

## **Interview**

**New Members @ 9:** Al and Stephanie Bergquist and Shirley Phillips