

Bringing the Gospel to the Greeks

An Unknown God Is Revealed

by **Andy Patton, 2018**

How did a small religious movement among rural Jews spread across the Roman Empire, causing upheaval and spiritual transformation wherever it went? That is the very question Luke, the author of the book of Acts, is trying to answer. The first half of Acts tells the story of the early years of the Christian movement from the point of view of a variety of characters. The second half, however, follows the missionary journeys of one remarkable person, Paul.

The Story So Far: Acts 1–16

Luke, a companion of Paul's on many of his travels, tells the story of Paul's conversion in Acts 9 and we learn that Jesus specifically appointed Paul to be his "chosen instrument to carry the name of Jesus before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel." Why does Luke focus the second half of his book on Paul? Because he was the perfect person for the job God gave him and his life embodied the story that Luke is trying to tell. Nowhere is Paul's aptitude more on display than during his time in Athens in Acts 17. We're going to look closely at Paul's sermon to the Athenians in Acts 17, but first, we need some context.

The question of whether or not Gentiles could come into the family of God was raised at the famous Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Just a few decades after the death of Jesus, the leaders of the Christian movement convened to rule on a question of cultural and theological practices for Gentile (non-Jewish) believers. Did the new converts need to be circumcised (the traditional sign of membership in the Jewish community and the people of God since the time of Abraham) or not? More was at stake than just circumcision. It was a question of whether new believers had to become Jews before they could become Christians.

Spurred on by Peter's experience of the conversion of a Roman centurion named Cornelius in Acts 10 (a kind of "second Pentecost" among the Gentiles), the Council of Jerusalem opened the door for Christianity to be uniquely expressed in each culture where the gospel took root. So instead of only Jewish Christians, it was possible to become Egyptian Christians, Roman Christians, Arabian Christians, and, as we will see in Acts 17, Greek Christians.

This decision was not an invention of the church leaders at the council. Rather, they were following the course set out for them by Christ himself. In Acts 1, Jesus explained the trajectory

of the early Christian movement when he told them that they would be his witnesses “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” It’s as if the church was to be a force that would be ever accelerating in its expansion of the Kingdom and bringing people into the family of God.

Throughout the book of Acts, Luke is giving his readers literary signposts at every significant step on the gospel’s outward journey. The first center of the church was Jerusalem, but when persecution broke out in Jerusalem, the church spread into Palestine and Samaria in [Acts 6–9](#). [Acts 9–12](#) records the progress of the gospel as far as Antioch, in modern-day Turkey. In the remainder of the book, Luke records the gospel’s spread through Asia Minor, Europe, and finally, Rome, the heart of the empire.

Context Before Context: Genesis to Acts

The story of [Acts 17](#) actually has its roots in [Genesis](#).

In the beginning of the Bible, Adam and Eve were given the task of stewarding and cultivating the whole earth toward flourishing; the garden was supposed to grow. In [Genesis 12](#), when God chose Abraham to be the beginning of a new family of God’s people, it was so that “all the families of the earth will be blessed.” Then, the law of Moses provided for God-fearing Gentiles who wanted to join the [covenant](#) people of God ([Exodus 12](#)). Like good priests, Israel was to mediate between God and humanity and usher people into his presence. In [Psalm 22](#), David wrote that “the ends of the earth will turn to the Lord.” Throughout the writings of Israel’s prophets are hints and foretellings of a time when all the nations of the earth, even Israel’s enemies, will follow God.

Moving forward in time, the Gospels record how Jesus constantly broke through people’s cultural categories and ethnic barriers. Jesus healed Jews and non-Jews alike, and even healed the servant of a centurion, a member of the despised occupying forces of Rome ([Matthew 8](#)). Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee into Gentile territory to heal a demon-possessed man ([Mark 5](#)). He lingered at a Samaritan well to have a conversation with a foreign woman ([John 4](#)). He tells her that, in contrast to her geographic and ethnic faith categories, “the hour is coming when

the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth,” wherever they are and whoever they are. So when Paul stands up to preach to the Athenians in Acts 17, he isn't doing anything new. He is riding the wave of the biblical storyline. The gospel was always on its way to Athens.

Paul's Day in Athens

In Acts 17, we find Paul arriving in Athens in the middle of his second missionary journey after being run out of several Greek cities along the coast of the Aegean Sea. What did Paul do upon arriving in Athens? The same thing he did everywhere else. He split his time between the synagogue and the marketplace, telling anyone who would listen about Jesus. It is no surprise that in Athens, the home of ancient philosophy, Paul got into a conversation with a few philosophers. The philosophers who began to argue with Paul were from two well-known philosophical camps: Stoicism and Epicureanism. As they listened to Paul, they were a bit put off (“What is this babbler talking about?” “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”). But they were intrigued enough to invite him to the Areopagus, which was something like a blend of a high court, city council, faculty, and general nexus of ideas for the city. Paul suddenly found himself on center stage in front of philosophers, judges, and intellectual Greeks.

Paul's Remarkable Sermon

Remember, Luke tells us in verse 16 that Paul had been wandering the city and looking at the Athenian idols, and that “his spirit was provoked within him.” Paul was angry at the city's idolatrous practices, but he began his address with praise, “Men of Athens,” he said, “I can see that in every way you are very spiritual.” This wasn't empty flattery. These are the words of a master architect laying the foundation for a bridge, which he is about to invite them to walk across. Paul hated the idols, yes, but he loved the God who scattered His truth so broadly that even in a city immersed in paganism, humans still sought the eternal. When he praised their spirituality, he praised the God who has always been the source of every good thing they love. He commended them for responding to God, even if they did not know him.

The Unknown God

During his visit to Athens, Paul had encountered an altar to an “Unknown God.” Local legend told of a devastating plague that had once swept through Athens. The people sacrificed to every god in the pantheon, but the gods did not stop the plague. The plague raged on until the poet Epimenedes suggested they raise an altar to an Unknown God. After they did, the city was saved. That altar remained, in Paul’s day, a memorial to the time Athens was delivered by a god from outside the Greek religion. In his speech at the Areopagus, Paul showed that the philosophers were wrong when they named him a “preacher of foreign divinities.” In fact, he was simply reintroducing them to one of their own gods, the one true God they had worshipped in ignorance until Paul arrived.

Speaking Their Own Language

Paul crafted his entire message to bridge the distance between the Christian gospel and the things the Athenians already treasured and trusted.

Through his speech, Paul took pains to phrase things in ways that would be familiar to the Greeks. Unlike his other messages in Acts, Paul never quoted the Old Testament. Why? Because the Hebrew scriptures were an irrelevant source to his hearers. Paul did not mention the name “Jesus” or the word “Christ,” which was the Greek translation of the Old Testament word “messiah.” When he referred to Jesus, Paul simply called him “the man God appointed.” He called God “the divine being” because that phrase is a Greek expression for God. The Stoics in the audience (who thought of God as “the divine essence”) would have been especially familiar with this way of speaking of God.

Paul described God in ways that both the Stoics and the Epicureans of the time would relate to. The Epicurean view of the gods emphasized their remoteness and the fact that they had no needs that could be supplied by humans. Paul echoed these ideas when he said that God is “not served by human hands.” The Stoics, on the other hand, had a more immanent conception of the gods, which Paul picked up on when he says that God “gives to all mankind life and

breath and everything.” You can imagine heads nodding in the audience.

But Paul did not only want his message to be understandable, he wanted it to move the Athenians toward belief in the one true God of the Bible. He wanted his words to challenge and transform their hearts and minds. He did this first by quoting a few of their own poets. When Paul said “we are his offspring,” he pulled a line directly from a poem by the Greek writer Aratus, which was part of a hymn to the father of the Greek gods, Zeus. The other quotation (“in [God] we live and move and have our being”) is from another poem about Zeus, whose author was the very same Epimenides who told the Athenians to erect an idol to an “unknown God” in order to stop the plague. (This is also the very same Epimenides who Paul later calls a “prophet” in the book of Titus.) Again, Paul showed the Athenians that the God he is presenting to them is one toward whom, in their brightest moments, they are already reaching.

Paul’s reference to their poets also drew attention to a few of the inconsistencies that lie at the heart of Greek philosophy and religion. He invited them to consider why, if we are God’s offspring, did they think the divine being is like an image of silver or gold? If God made us, how can we imagine that we can also make God? Also, if we “live and move and have our being” in God, how can we imagine that a temple made by human hands could contain him? He guided them directly into the fault lines at play within Greek philosophy itself.

Paul moves to his conclusion in verse 30.

The God who saved Athens from the plague and whom you already worship as the “Unknown God” has been patient with you, he said. He has been kind to you, he has saved you. But now the “times of ignorance” are over, and He is calling you to repent and believe in him. Paul’s divisive climax is his bold claim that the truth of his message is proven because “a man God has appointed” has been killed and God raised him from the dead.

The Areopagus exploded at mention of the resurrection. Some mocked him. Yet for some, Paul touched something that had perhaps been niggling away at the back of their minds, and they wanted to hear more. Others were convinced and joined him, becoming believers.

Andy Patton is a former staff member at L'Abri Fellowship in England. He is the co-editor of Three Things Newsletter and the creator of The Darkling Psalter, a collection of commentary, translations, and poetry about the Psalms. He holds an M.A. in theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and if there was such a thing as a card-carrying Bible nerd, he would hold one of those too.