

## How Do We Connect Unbelievers to God?

Acts 17:22-33

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*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. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man. - Acts 17:23-24, ESV*

We live in a pluralistic culture full of unbelievers. In so many ways, our culture is just like ancient Athens. Although our culture claims to be much more secular and has a larger number of anti-religious people, still various forms of unbelief marked by idolatry are rampant all around us. As believers who love the Lord and are called to love our neighbors, we struggle to know how to reach our unbelieving neighbors and how to connect them to God. Today's text gives us a wonderful example of how to do this.

In our last reading, we saw Paul's grief over the idolatry of Athens. We saw his drive to engage people with the Gospel. Today, we see him addressing a prestigious gathering of intellectuals on the Aereopagus, the rock outcropping on Mars Hill. This site had been the gathering site of the Athenian Senate for hundreds of years and was a place of public discourse and deliberation.

Paul begins his address on Mars Hill in an unexpected manner. The idolatry that has grieved him so much was, in fact, a symptom of the desire of the Athenians to worship. The Athenians were deeply religious and passionately committed to seeking the truth - or at least, that's what they told themselves! So, Paul connects with this in a positive way. He commends them for their religiousness, even though it was sinful and idolatrous.

Next, Paul surprises again by saying that he had come to proclaim to them "the unknown God" they worshiped. So, Paul is really seeking to connect to what they already have in their cultural life. He goes even further by quoting from their literature: "*In him we live and move and have our being*" and "*For we are indeed his offspring.*" These are not quotes from Scripture but from pagan Greek poets, probably writing about Zeus.

But we should notice that while Paul bends over backwards to connect with the cultural context of his audience, he does not water down or compromise the message of the Gospel. He directly confronts their idolatry when he says, "*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.*" (v. 29) He also clearly proclaims the coming judgment of the world by Jesus: "*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.*" (v. 31)

So, how can we connect to our unbelieving neighbors and seek to connect them to God? Well, Paul would call us to four things:

1. Get to know our neighbors and their culture well enough that we can "speak their language," incorporating cultural references that they would understand.
2. Affirm what is positive in their culture that might connect with a God-ward orientation.
3. Affirm and celebrate the equality and even the unity of all humanity under God, as His offspring.
4. Tell the truth, clearly and boldly, about who Jesus is, what He has done and what He will do when He comes again.

*Heavenly Father, we know that our neighbors need You. They need to be reconciled to You, which is only possible through Your Son, Jesus Christ. Thank You that You have provided salvation through Your Son. Give us the wisdom, understanding, courage and faith to be good witnesses to our neighbors of the truth that is in Jesus. In His name we pray, Amen.*