

Christ Against Athens

Acts 17:16-34

First words matter. If he loses his audience—either by boring them or insulting them—he'll never get them back again. To Paul the Athenians were like blind men groping in the dark toward a God they did not know and could not find. But no kind person makes sport of the blind. Write it down in large letters: You cannot insult a person into the Kingdom of God. Were not the Athenians idolaters? Yes, and Paul knew it, and it grieved his spirit. But he didn't begin by saying, "I've come to expose your sin, you dirty, wretched, hell-bound, idol-worshipping, heathenistic pagans. Thank God I'm here because I'm going to lead you to Jesus." - That is not a gospel approach to anything.

Paul begins with a very simple statement: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious." Some have a translation that reads, "You are very superstitious." Paul chose a word that was deliberately ambiguous. It could mean either "religious" in a neutral sense or it could mean "superstitious." No doubt the men of Athens took it as a compliment about their religious nature, while Paul himself regarded them as extremely superstitious. Both meanings were true. They were religious and they were superstitious.

Three Important Truths

We learn three important truths about the nature of man from Paul's introduction:

1) Mankind is inherently religious. Anthropologists tell us that every society on earth—no matter how primitive—has some conception of a higher power. It may be evil spirits that inhabit the rocks or unnamed deities who send death and destruction on the earth. Or it may be some mystical force that fills the universe. But all people by nature seek ultimate meaning outside themselves.

2) Even the most corrupt religion demonstrates man's innate capacity to know God. I think this was the point Paul meant to emphasize when he said, "You are very religious." It's not that Paul approved of their idolatry. But he recognized it as the gropings of men for some truth they knew existed but could not find.

3) Idolatry exists because the human race has suppressed the true knowledge of God or at least confused it by inserting cultural values. We were made to know God, but when we suppress the truth of God found in creation and written in our own hearts, we always turn to idolatry. That's Paul's point in Romans 1:18-21 where he says that the truth about God is "clearly seen" by each person. But when we suppress that truth

revealed to us and in us, there is nothing left but idolatry, and after that sexual sin, and after that every kind of sin, and after that, the total collapse of morality (Romans 1:18-32).

One great lesson that can be said of Athens as an experience - teaches us the necessity of divine revelation. Athens represents the “City of Man” at its best—and it’s still not good. You can’t reason your way to God because human reason has been darkened by the Fall (Ephesians 4:17-19). We can still think but we can’t think God’s thoughts unless the Holy Spirit illuminates our minds so that we can see God’s truth. The way to heaven must be revealed from above.

Second great lesson: Paul finds common ground to start a gospel conversation. Paul borrowed from their own culture (altars) and their own language (Poets) to make connections. It doesn’t mean compromising your values in order to preach the gospel. Paul is finding a way to gain a hearing with these highly intelligent people. And how did he find it? The same way you will in your own evangelism—by listening, by reading, by watching, by observing, by paying attention to what people say and do. Since God has set eternity in every human heart, sooner or later that longing for eternity will express itself in one way or another. Pay attention and you’ll see it when it happens. That’s your common ground. It’s your open door to share Christ.

The story Paul chose to teach the city about “the unknown God” was the story of creation, the story of one man out of humanity, the resurrection and judgment by the one man God sent into the world. Out of the “spider-web of nations” came one man from one particular nation to die for all the nations and become Savior of creation. All people must repent and believe in the one man in order to rise again and become one nation under Christ.

Christ Against Athens Acts 17:16–34

Big Idea: *Humanity may search for God, but only God can reveal Himself—and He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.*

Introduction: Athens Had Everything—Except the Truth

- Athens was a center of philosophy, learning, culture, and religion.
- Yet Paul saw a city filled with idols.
- The Athenians were searching for God, but they did not know the God they were searching for.
- You cannot insult a person into the Kingdom of God.

- Paul did not begin by attacking Athens; he began by finding a way to speak to Athens.

1. Man Is Searching for God

Acts 17:22–23

“I perceive that in every way you are very religious.”

Three truths about humanity:

- **Mankind is inherently religious.**
 - Every culture searches for ultimate meaning.
 - We are made to look beyond ourselves.
- **Even false religion reveals a genuine longing for God.**
 - Their altar “to the unknown god” reveals their uncertainty.
 - They knew there was something—or Someone—they had not yet found.
- **Idolatry is the result of suppressing the truth about God.**
 - Romans 1:18–21
 - We were made to know God.
 - When truth is suppressed, something else takes His place.

Application:

People may reject Christianity, but that does not mean they have stopped searching for meaning, purpose, eternity, or God.

2. Man Cannot Find God Without Revelation

Acts 17:23–29

Paul moves from their unknown god to the known Creator.

God must make Himself known.

- **God made the world — He is Creator. (v. 24)**
- **God does not live in temples made by human hands — He is transcendent. (v. 24)**
- **God gives life and breath to all — He is the sustainer. (v. 25)**
- **God made every nation — He is sovereign over humanity. (vv. 26–27)**
- **God is not far from us — He is not inaccessible. (v. 27)**

Athens represents humanity at its intellectual best.

- Philosophy can ask questions.
- Reason can investigate.
- Culture can search.
- Religion can reach.
- But none of these can independently discover God.

Ephesians 4:17–19 reminds us that fallen humanity's understanding is darkened.

The way to heaven must be revealed from above.

3. The Gospel Begins With Common Ground

Acts 17:22–28

Paul knew his audience.

He listened.

He observed.

He read their culture.

He understood their language.

Paul found an open door.

- Their altar: “To the unknown god.”
- Their poets: “For we are indeed his offspring.”
- Their religious longing became Paul's starting point for the gospel.

Common ground is not compromise.

- Paul did not affirm their idolatry.
- He used what they already understood to introduce what they did not know.
- He found a way to gain a hearing.

Application:

Evangelism requires more than talking. It requires listening.

- What are people afraid of?
- What are they searching for?
- What gives them hope?
- What do they worship?
- Where do they sense that life must mean more?

Pay attention. Their questions may become your opportunity to talk about Christ.

4. Christ Is the Answer to Athens

Acts 17:29–31

Paul's message ultimately moves from creation to Christ.

The unknown God has revealed Himself.

- **He is the Creator.**
- **He is the Lord.**
- **He is the Judge.**
- **He has appointed one Man.**
- **He raised that Man from the dead.**

Paul does not leave Athens with philosophy. He gives them Jesus.

One Man for all humanity

- **One Creator made all nations.**
- **One Savior came for all nations.**
- **One Man will judge all humanity.**
- **One resurrection guarantees that judgment.**

The nations may be many, but the gospel is one. The spider-web of nations leads to one Man—Jesus Christ.

5. Christ Demands a Response

Acts 17:30–34

“God commands all people everywhere to repent.”

Paul's sermon does not end with information. It ends with a command.

The response is unavoidable:

- **Repent.**
- **Believe.**
- **Prepare for judgment.**
- **Trust the risen Christ.**

The resurrection changes everything.

- **If Christ is risen, God has authenticated His Son.**
- **If Christ is risen, judgment is certain.**

- If Christ is risen, repentance is necessary.
- If Christ is risen, salvation is available to all.

Athens Responded in Three Ways

Acts 17:32–34

- Some mocked.
- Some wanted to hear more.
- Some believed.

Paul could not control their response. He could only faithfully proclaim Christ.

Conclusion: Christ Against Athens

Athens represents humanity at its best:

Intelligent—but searching.

Religious—but confused.

Cultured—but idolatrous.

Philosophical—but spiritually blind.

The answer was not a better philosophy. The answer was Christ.

Humanity searches.

God reveals.

Christ saves.