

# ACTS | A Church on Mission | Story 25 — Part 2

Acts 17:16-34

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## **Introduction**

Throughout the book of Acts there is an outward, ever-expanding movement of God that begins in Jerusalem and then spreads into all the earth. If you think of it in concentric circles...

There is Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Sometimes God used persecution to get the early followers to disperse and take the gospel. Other times God spoke to the church through the Holy Spirit to send specific people out from their midst to plant churches, to make disciples, to spread the gospel to new regions, new territories, and new people groups.

But through the book of Acts there is a constant OUTWARD MOMENTUM... OUTWARD FOCUS.

**In the Old Testament God was setting Israel up as His nation** that would reveal to all the world what it meant to be a nation ruled by a good and benevolent God—and through Israel, God would draw the world unto Himself.

**What came at Pentecost, the sending of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church was the reversal of that movement.** It was no longer about attracting in order to draw in—it was about empowering in order to send out.

In fact, this reveals one of the primary problems in the western church today. We've lost our sense of mission—or our mission has been twisted.

***Today we'll examine the fruit that comes from the gospel-centered, outward-focused church. A church, built on the gospel, that exists not for itself, but for the sake of others. For the sake of those who aren't here yet — a Church on Mission.***

- Silas and Timothy, Paul's young protégé's, had remained at Berea to help galvanize the newly established church there. Paul had instructed them to join him when they'd completed the last of their work in Berea. In the meantime...

### **Acts 17:16-34**

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 babbler 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.

<sup>22</sup> So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, <sup>25</sup> 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, <sup>28</sup> 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.’”

<sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> 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.” <sup>32</sup> Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” <sup>33</sup> So Paul went out from their midst. <sup>34</sup> But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

## **BACKGROUND:**

Athens, the chief city of Greece, had been conquered by Rome. Though it was no longer a military power, it was still the intellectual and cultural center of the Roman Empire. That’s where the intellectual elites lived.

The center of the cultural center was the *agora*. This is translated marketplace. In English the word *marketplace* just gives us the impression of something like a shopping district. Which, it was that, but it wasn’t JUST that. When Paul went to the ***agora***, he was going to the **shopping district**, but also...

- **The media center** of Athens. The way you found out what was going on in the world is you had to go to the *agora* where the heralds would give bulletins and announcements.
- It was the **financial center**.
- It was the **stock market**. This is where the investors and business owners would bargain, and strike deals with one another.
- It was the **arts center**, it’s where artists and performers did their work.
- But it was the **intellectual center**. There were no journals. There were no editorial pages. Where did new ideas, political, philosophical, or whatever, get debated? Where did they get worked out? It was face to face, out in the open market, in the *agora*.

Look at where Paul took the gospel. Look where he went... did he take it to people who were already worshippers? He went to the synagogue, so that’s there, that’s evident.

*But he also took the gospel to the cultural epicenter of the Greek and Roman world.* He took the gospel to the public square, where there is this melting pot of all these different philosophical, political, and religious ideas and beliefs. Where commerce and trade were happening. He took the gospel to the middle of all the hubbub in Athens.

***Are you about to tell me that’s what I’m supposed to do? I’m supposed to become a street evangelist? Do we all have to do what Paul did?***

- **The answer is no. Two reasons...**
- First—Paul was a world-class public communicator. He was gifted by God for that specific task. If you haven't been gifted by God with the gift of preaching or teaching... chances are, that's not what God is calling you to do.
- Second— we don't have a place like the agora in our culture today. There's no physical space quite like it where culture, intellect, philosophy, commerce, and religion all come together for open dialogue.

***But here's what you do need to understand...***

- If you understand the goodness and the power of the gospel, and you are constantly returning to it, building your life on it.... it will not remain in your private life only.

**PERSONAL:** My grandfather, was a WWII veteran... and I remember not long before he passed talking with him about Jesus... I wanted to make sure He knew the Lord before He passed... and he lost his patience with me because in his generation, you didn't talk about things like that. That was a private issue. Then he proceeded to tell me that if it weren't for Jesus, he never would have survived the war. But that's as far as we got because he had no time for people who wore their religion on their sleeve.

But the problem is... if there is a genuine understanding of the beauty, the power, the depth, the grandness, the enormity of the gospel... you cannot keep it under wraps. It will make its way out into the public square of your life. It won't only come out only on Sunday, it will inform, and influence everything about you.

**THE MESSAGE IS IMPORTANT —  
THE METHOD OF SHARING THE MESSAGE IS ALSO VERY IMPORTANT!**

**Now, does that mean you get obnoxious about your faith? Does it mean you become mean-spirited toward anyone that doesn't believe what you believe, or think the way you think? Does it mean you attack the pagan culture for being pagan?**

Let's look at Paul's example.

HOW did the gospel make its way out in a very public discussion and debate with a variety of people that were either ambivalent or antagonistic toward the gospel?

**How did Paul conduct himself?**

## **Connection not Criticism**

When Paul begins his speech in the Areopagus, ***you know what he doesn't do?***

- **He doesn't** tell the Athenians about how all of their Hellenistic pagan beliefs are going to condemn them to be thrown into the lake of fire where they'll burn for all eternity.
- **He doesn't** tell them how immoral they are, and how they're a bunch of morons for not knowing about or believing in the resurrected Jesus.
- **He doesn't** mock their statue to the "unknown God."
- **He doesn't** criticize them even a little bit, he doesn't even come close...

The very first thing he does—is **Build a bridge. Build connection. Understanding.**

## **Acts 17:22-25**

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, <sup>25</sup> nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

Everybody listening would have adamantly agreed with everything Paul said. There wouldn't have been any objections. What Paul is doing is building commonality with those that he didn't have much in common with. He's building bridges in hopes that he might win some to Christ.

One of the things that grieves the Holy Spirit is when our approach to reaching lost people has with it no consideration for the heart of the other person. Without wisdom, grace, humility—without any fear of God, we assault and condemn the lost in the name of “truth,” and we use the scriptures as a brutalizing weapon, not a surgeon's scalpel.

What we see Paul doing here is taking ENORMOUS care in not just *what* he's saying, but *HOW* he's saying it. Not only in the message, but in the METHOD.

The sad reality of the world we're living in—is that Christians will do things in the name of God that God has absolutely nothing to do with. And Paul here is showing us some incredible wisdom in his approach to sharing the gospel—in the Areopagus.

***What does this have to do with me? I'm never going to preach in a public square like that.***

Maybe not... but what every single one of us has the opportunity to do—is to build connection with people that are far from God—every single day. Paul was given this opportunity in this moment—but that moment was YEARS in the making.

Many of us want to rush into leading someone to Jesus without loving that person. Or probably more common in the south is we just want the pastor to do it for us. But the scripture doesn't relieve you of your calling to represent Christ to a lost world.

Sometimes it takes years of building connection and relationships, before you are given an opportunity like Paul was given here.

We have to view people as worthy of dignity, of love, of kindness—regardless of their beliefs. Even if they never open the door and give their lives to Christ, we ought to be loving those that are far from God with the love of Christ anyway.

**People are not projects that we try to convert.** People are worthy of love and relationship— whether they ever open the door to Christ or not. Paul, in this passage, was given an open door, and he walked through it carefully, tactfully, lovingly.

***The next thing we see in Paul's method is—he builds...***

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## Commonality without Compromise

As we follow our Narrow Road... there are ditches on either side.

**There is a tension here... because on one side of a ditch we can fall into is...**

1. In an effort to find common ground, we completely compromise on the truth of the word of God and preach a distorted and watered-down gospel.
2. On the other side of the ditch, we never build any common ground and are never given an opportunity to share the truth of the gospel.
3. What we see Paul doing here is meeting the culture where it is... meeting people where they are, seeking to understand their point of view, *without compromising the truth of scripture in the process*.
4. But not compromising does not mean, be a jerk. You don't have to even tell anyone, "I'm not willing to compromise my beliefs." **Don't say it, just don't do it.**
5. But what Paul does—is he knows their poets, he knows their beliefs, he's studied it...

### Acts 17:28

...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."

**Paul is quoting Greek poetry!** The first quotation was likely from the Greek poet Epimenides, who died in the sixth century B.C., and the second quotation from the Greek poet Aratus, who died in 240 B.C.. *Do you see the genius of Paul's approach? He's making the case for his faith by anchoring its truths in things the Athenian philosophers already believed.*

**He's building common ground with them—but not compromising.**

I've found especially in traditionally religious circles, that Christians are afraid to study other religions or philosophy... there is this mindset of, "Well you can't study other religions because what if they convince you and you depart from the faith..."

- First of all, if you're a brand-new believer and trying to understand Christianity more deeply... get yourself rooted in what you believe and why you believe it.
- But if you've been following Christ for any significant amount of time and the foundation of your faith is that flimsy that simply studying other beliefs and religions would cause you to abandon Christ Himself, there is a whole other issue to deal with.

Some of us are so fearful about the "evil" out in the world that the enemy has completely paralyzed us from taking any ground for the kingdom. We're so "afraid" of evil, that we never take the light that God has placed in us into dark places.

It begs the question, if He who lives in me is greater than he who is in the world... why would I make it my aim in life to separate and distance myself from a world that is desperately in need for what God has asked me to give away freely?

**The only way we'll ever take ground is if we begin to move into enemy territory.** That's why Jesus was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard... because he was always hanging out with the dregs of society.

**What if someone sees me!? What will they think?** If someone thinks poorly of you or attacks your character because of your loyalty and determination to accomplish the mission God has put you on earth to accomplish... so be it.

**EXAMPLE:** There's a scene in *The Chosen* television series where the disciples are staying as guests in someone's house overnight and as they're being welcomed in the owner says, "The one bedroom is haunted by my dead grandmother" and Jesus says, "Ooo I'll take that one!" Creative liberty for sure, but the portrayal of Jesus without fear of the evil world out there. It's just a reminder of who we are as God's children and the power we've been given.

- **Our job is not to separate ourselves from the world.**
- **Our calling as Christ followers is to move into the world without compromising for the world.**
- **In the world, not of it.**
- **Building commonality without compromise.**

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## **Correction not Condemnation**

Paul noted, "God made the nations so they would seek him, perhaps even reach out to him and find him. In fact, God isn't far away from any of us." In other words, he's correcting their thinking... that God is not distant, and unknowable... but that he's near and hopes to be found.

Paul is saying, the pagan gods might live on Mount Olympus, but the one true God is as near as the air we breathe and has revealed Himself to us in the person of Jesus.

He's correcting their wrong thinking... but he's not condemning them! Then he offers another correction.

### **Acts 17:29-31**

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. <sup>30</sup> The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> 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."

**He gives them the resurrection, righteousness, and repentance for all people.**

**He gives them the beautiful invitation of the gospel.**

### **Acts 17:32-33**

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." <sup>33</sup> So Paul went out from their midst. <sup>34</sup> But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Only a few people believed. But what you need to understand is *those few people laid a foundation of the church that took Athens, and the first century world by storm.* There is a street in Athens today named after Damaris, and tradition holds that she was martyred for her faith and is celebrated as a catalyst for the explosive growth of the church in Athens.

The few that believed were not insignificant. It wasn't a failure by any stretch.

**We should never discount what God can do through a few.**  
***The question is, are we willing to be used by God to reach the few?***

- It's not about where we've been. It's about where we're going.
- It's not about the past... It's about what God is going to do.
- We can honor the past, without living in it.

The days ahead are bright and beautiful for Grace Chapel. There is a world out there that needs the gospel. There is a world out there that needs a church that exists, not for its own benefit but for the sake the lost, broken, and forgotten. For the sake of those that aren't here yet.

The problem with the western church is it often becomes relegated to a bunch of people coming to watch a few people operate in their gifts. But the Kingdom of God is not about the many coming to watch the few, but the people of God empowered by the Spirit of God, many reaching the lost. It's about EVERY SINGLE PERSON functioning and operating in their God-given gifts. The Church is not a spectator sport. God is faithful to His bride, He is faithful to complete the work He has begun, and we will remain faithful to Him by fulfilling the mission He's given us.

It's a new year. It's a new day. And God is doing a new thing.

### **Isaiah 43:18-19**

Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. <sup>19</sup> Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

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## **Discussion Questions**

1. What method did Paul use to connect with the Athenians without criticizing them?
2. How can you connect with some non-Christians that you know?
3. How did Paul make the transition from building the bridge of commonality to telling the truth of the scripture without compromise?
4. We should never discount what God can do through a few people. The question is, are you willing to be used by God to reach the few? How?

# NOTES